

CAMBRIDGE SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES

## SAINTS, GODDESSES AND KINGS

South India, often portrayed as a society of entrenched Hindu orthodoxy, is actually a region in which three great 'world religions' came to overlap and interpenetrate over many centuries. Using a combination of archival materials, interviews and sources such as shrine histories, ballads and popular miracle literature, this book investigates the social and religious world of the large and influential groups of south Indians who came to identify themselves as Christians and Muslims, while retaining powerful links with the religion and culture of the wider society. It shows how Christianity and Islam spread along the military and agricultural frontiers of southern India, pushed forward by traders, by the patronage of kings, and by the charismatic example of warrior saints and holy men. Many of the beliefs and practices of Christians and Muslims derived their force from an ambiguous relationship with the worship of Hindu goddesses, that is with the most important deities of what was becoming 'Hindu' south India. Dr. Bayly's book therefore throws light not only on the meaning and history of religious conversion and the nature of community but on wider processes of social and political change in the Indian sub-continent and in other colonial societies.

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# SAINTS, GODDESSES AND KINGS

*Muslims and Christians in South Indian society  
1700–1900*

SUSAN BAYLY



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## PREFACE

This book arose out of an attempt to resolve a range of paradoxes in the religious and social life of southern India. Even the most casual visitor knows that the south Indian worshipper inhabits a world of spectacular colour and vitality. In every city and every village, shrines abound and elaborate rituals are an everyday occurrence. Most striking of all is the fact that in the Tamil and Malayalam-speaking regions of south India, powerful and dynamic variants of the three major 'world religions'—Hinduism, Islam and Christianity—have grown, developed and overlapped, all within the comparatively recent historical past, and all within a setting of remarkably rapid social and political change.

The result, much commented upon by early travellers and still apparent today, is a society in which warlike Muslim and Christian saints and indigenous divinities of blood and power came to be revered and worshipped by professing Christians, Muslims and Hindus. Everywhere in the south, 'people of the Book', self-professed adherents of the so-called convert religions, join their Hindu neighbours in ceremonial chariot processions modelled on those of the region's great Siva and Vishnu temples. In the region's pre-colonial states and kingdoms, Hindu and Muslim rulers stood as sponsors to the shrines and ceremonies of Christian Virgins and indigenous Tamil and Malayali warrior goddesses; men of every origin and affiliation still fight fiercely over flags, banners and other tokens of ceremonial 'honour' and precedence, and cults of vegetarian abstinence flourish in close association with ferocious rites of blood-letting and supernaturally inspired ritual head-severing.

What, if anything, is the meaning of all this colour and drama? What can it tell us about the relationship between religious ideology and social practice, and about the links between state power and the origins of formally constituted religious communities and caste groups? What can be learned about the capacity of the foreign 'conversion' religions to transplant themselves into societies possessing their own rapidly evolving religious cultures?

One assumption that has guided my work from the beginning is that it is possible to make sense of this *mélange* of cults, rituals and conflicts through historical analysis. I sought to understand how Islam and

Christianity first took root in south India, and how Tamils and Malayalis came to perceive and assimilate the new teachings and divinities that were presented to them. I hoped to discover how the so-called 'convert' groups came to fit into the wider society of these regions, and how the missionaries and other bearers of foreign religious teaching understood the tasks they had set themselves and the alien cultures which they encountered.

The study itself began on a much smaller scale, as an historical study of popular Christianity in southern Tamilnad and Kerala. In my Ph.D. dissertation I stressed the depth and resilience of south India's indigenous religious traditions in these encounters with the faiths of foreign missionaries. Converted Christians were never isolated from the world of indigenous cult devotion and conflicts over ceremonial 'honours'. As the new adherents learned to tame and domesticate the power of their missionaries and the supernatural pantheons which they brought with them, local forms eventually joined and invigorated the new teachings, producing a dynamic and creative religious synthesis.

This account of Tamil and Malayali Christians might have stood on its own. However, when the award of a Research Fellowship at Clare Hall, Cambridge made it possible for me to undertake further research in India, it became clear that the study would be much more useful if the treatment of converts, conversion and the indigenous society could be expanded to include an account of Islam in south India as well. The appeal of a comparative study was very powerful. There were parallels as well as sharp contrasts in the experience of the two 'conversion' religions in south India, and although the task was bound to become much more ambitious and time-consuming, it was impossible to resist the challenge involved in trying to set the Muslim saint-martyr next to the Christian Virgin, to compare the rise of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Muslim trader, warrior and ruler with the origins and development of the Christian 'convert' groups of the pre-colonial and colonial eras.

In carrying out this study, I had the good fortune to find much rich and hitherto unused historical source material. My attempt to understand south Indian Muslim society was enhanced by the use of Tamil ballads, devotional poems, shrine histories and biographical texts. I sought to illuminate these often difficult works with material drawn from more conventional Indian and British archival collections, and to compare and contrast them with the missionary records and unique caste documents which I had used in my study of south Indian Christians. In addition, I attempted to supplement the written record with visits to Muslim, Christian and Hindu shrines, cult centres and festivals, and through

discussions and interviews with worshippers, devotees, priests, missionaries and shrine officiants in many localities.

It was never the intention to produce a standard history of Christian missions or a comprehensive account of Muslim expansion throughout the south. Such exhaustive coverage would be beyond the scope of a single volume, even if the sources were available to discuss both religious traditions in every region of south India or at the same level of detail for both the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Nor was it the intention to deal directly with technical problems of theology: the work is concerned with religious ideas only in so far as they affect social organisation and practice.

It is hoped that the work will provide a distinctive south Indian contribution to debates about the nature and origins of religious conversion and the status of religious minorities which have absorbed historians of all societies from late Roman Europe to colonial and post-colonial Asia, Africa and the Americas. As conflicts between religious and ethnic groups persist and even widen in the modern age, it is natural that historians will turn increasingly to that most intractable of problems in the social sciences, the relationship between religious identity and social action.

There are many people to thank for their assistance during the making of this book. The British Academy Small Grants Research Fund in the Humanities provided generous support during two of my extended periods of archival and field work in India. I am also grateful to the Smuts Memorial Fund, the Worts Travelling Scholars Fund, the Cambridge Historical Society, the Sir Ernest Cassel Educational Trust and to Clare Hall, Cambridge, and New Hall, Cambridge, for additional finance. For access to books, records and manuscripts and for much courteous help I am grateful to the directors, librarians and staff of the India Office Library and Records; the Tamilnadu Archives; the National Archives of India; the Kerala Secretariat; the Tirunelveli Collectorate Records Office; the Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge; the Cambridge University Library; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the Connemara Library, Madras; and the Muhammadan Public Library, Madras. I owe special thanks for the use of materials at the Hazarat Makan, Vellore, and in the Library and Archive of the Jesuit Madura Mission, formerly at Sacred Heart College, Shembaganur. Grateful acknowledgement is also due to the *Malayala Manorama* newspaper, Kottayam; United Theological College, Bangalore; the MD Seminary and Mar Thoma Syrian Seminary, Kottayam; the University of Madras Library; the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies; the Houghton Library, Harvard University; and the archives of the Church Missionary Society, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Salvation Army.

In India many individuals gave munificently of their time, energy and patience. A complete list would occupy many pages, but I must single out Mr V. Sundaram, IAS; Dr J. Rajamohamed; the late Mr Ahmad Parpayya; Professor F.X. Miranda; Professor J.X. Arachi; Mr M.K. Gomethagavelu, IAS; HH the Prince of Arcot; Professor Mehboob Pasha; Sri Satyapal; Professor S. Gopalan; Mr S.V. Maruthavanan; Mr A.D. Jeyaveera Pandian; the late Mr A.H. Muhammad Ghaus Sahib; Haji P.A. Mohideen; Dr S.O.S. Ahamed, and Mr K. Chokkalingam, IAS. The Miranda family of Tuticorin and Manapad were amongst those who opened their homes to me when I first arrived in south India; they helped me to take my first steps towards an understanding of their society. My special thanks are also due to those who gave me access to family records and other documents, especially Professor Hasrat Suharwardy of Jamal Mohamed College, Trichy and Mr Britto Motha of Tuticorin.

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My thanks also to Clare Hall, Cambridge; I am fortunate to have had such a long and happy association with this unique institution. Warm acknowledgements are also due to the Master and Fellows of Christ's College, Cambridge; my Fellowship at Christ's has provided me with a particularly welcoming and stimulating environment in which to complete this volume. All these individuals and institutions contributed much to its creation; its faults are mine alone.

Finally special thanks must go to my parents and my brother Richard, from whom I have derived support and encouragement of every kind. And above all there is my husband Chris who has listened, cheered and exhorted and who has undoubtedly heard far too much over the years about shrines, saints and severing. His own scholarship has always been a source of inspiration, and it is to him, with loving gratitude, that this book is dedicated.

## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The system of Tamil transliteration used in this volume follows that of the *Madras University Tamil Lexicon*. The use of diacritical marks has been kept to a minimum. Conventional English spellings have been used for proper names and for terms such as bhakti, varna and Brahman where the equivalent Tamil forms would give rise to confusion. Transliteration of most Arabic and Persian names and terms follows common south Indian usage and is not therefore consistent.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- Bahar* *Bahār-ī-A'Zam Jāhī of Ghulam 'Abdu'l-Qadir Nazir* (Trans. S. Muhammad Husayn Nainar), Madras, 1950
- BC Board's Collections (Documents prepared for Board of Control, London)
- BOR Board of Revenue (Government of Madras)
- CIS *Contributions to Indian Sociology*
- CM Record *Church Missionary Record*
- CMS Church Missionary Society
- CMSA Church Missionary Society Archives
- CO Colonial Office (Records)
- EP *Edavaka Patrika* newspaper
- IA *Indian Antiquary*
- ICHR *Indian Church History Review*
- ICHA Indian Church History Archives, Bangalore
- IESHR *Indian Economic and Social History Review*
- IOL India Office Library, London
- JT Jati talaivan (Parava caste headman)
- KSS *Kān Sāhibu Sandai* ('Khan Sahib's War', a Tamil ballad)
- LMS London Missionary Society
- MAS *Modern Asian Studies*
- MJLS *Madras Journal of Literature and Science*
- MMA Madura Mission Archives
- MNNR Reports on Native Newspapers, Madras
- MJP Madras Judicial Proceedings
- MPP Madras Political Proceedings
- MS Mill Papers of the Rev. Dr W.H. Mill, Bodleian Library, Oxford
- MSSR Madras States Residency Records
- NAI National Archives of India, New Delhi
- PCD Parava Caste Documents collection, Tuticorin
- PRO Public Record Office
- QJMS *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society*, Bangalore
- SPG Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts
- TCR Tirunelveli Collectorate Records

TGER	Travancore Government English Records
TJCR	Tanjore Collectorate Records
TNA	Tamil Nadu Archives, Madras
TSA	Kerala Secretariat Archive, Trivandrum
UTC	United Theological College, Bangalore





1 The goddess Durga defeats the 'demonic' buffalo Mahisasura



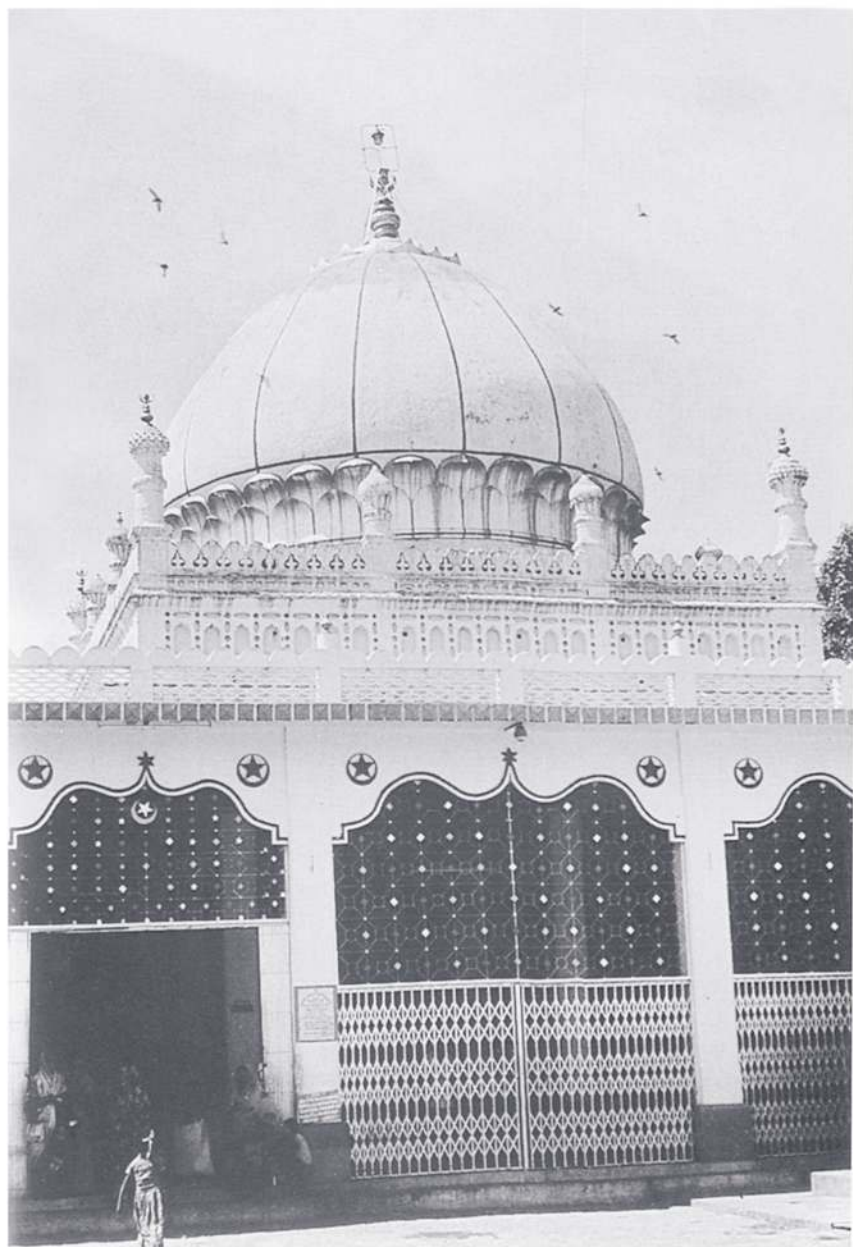
2 Giant terracotta horse and rider at a shrine of the warrior horseman god Lord Aiyanar



3 A couple praying for offspring at a shrine of lingam stones bearing the naga (serpent image) emblem



4 The god's ceremonial chariot (*ter*) in a festival procession near the Mylapore Sri Kapaliswarar temple, Madras



5 Domed tomb shrine (*dargah*) of the Trichy cult saint Nathar Wali



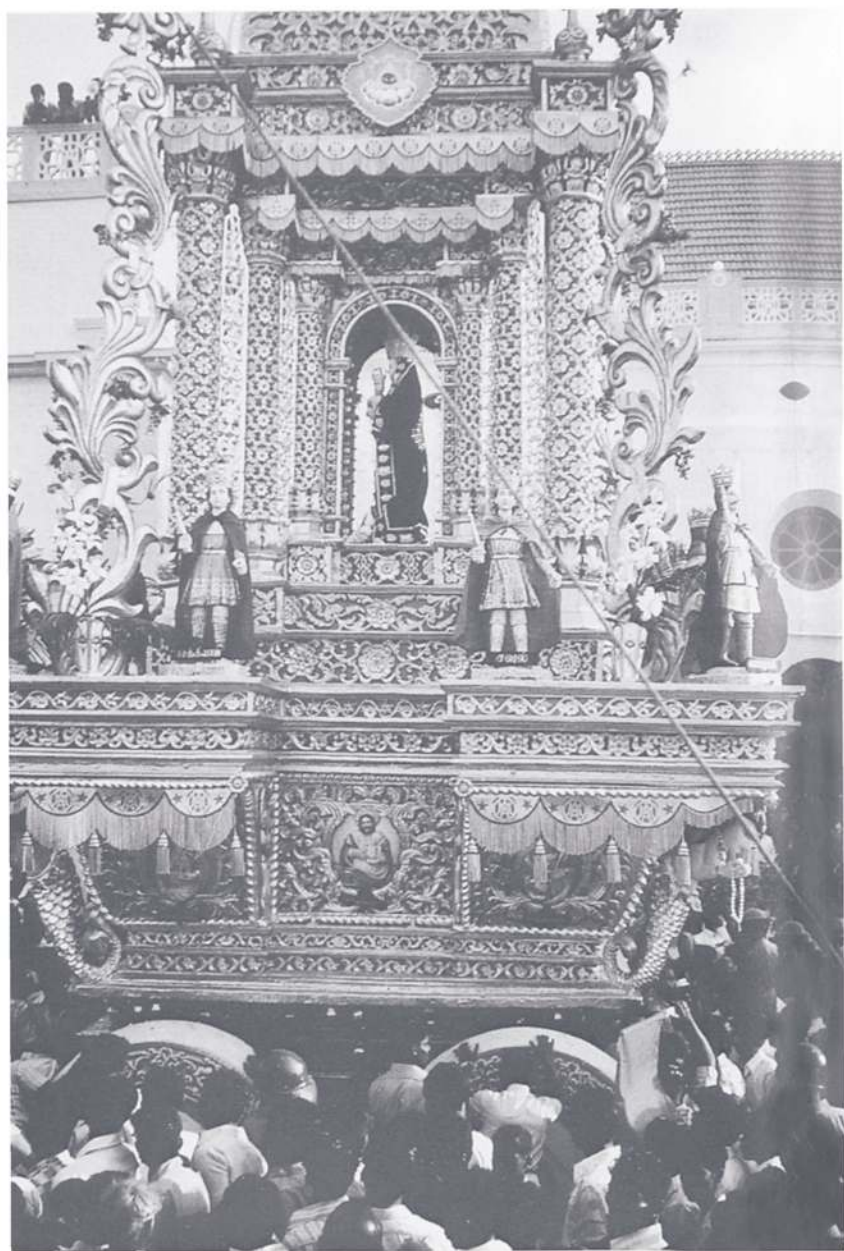
6 Eighteenth-century tomb shrine of the Bijapur Sufi 'Dastagir Sahib', Mylapore, Madras



7 The eighteenth-century Walajah mosque, Madras; and, to right, tomb shrine of the north Indian Sufi Bahr al-Ulum



8 Trumpeters at Trichy proclaiming the end of the Muslim fast of Ramadan



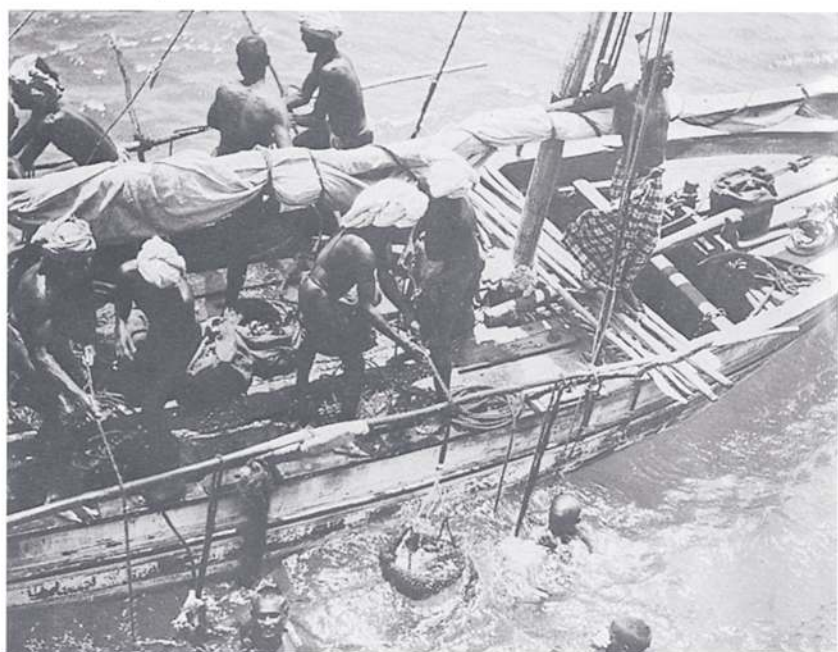
9 Worshippers surrounding the ceremonial chariot bearing the statue of Our Lady of Snows in the Golden Car festival, Tuticorin



10 Senhor Senhor Dom Manuel Luis de Cruz Anastasius Motha Correra, the last officially recognised Parava caste headman, at his installation in 1926



11 Mar Dionysius IV, *metran* (chief prelate) of the 'Jacobite' St Thomas Christians



12 Tamil divers fishing for pearls off the coast of Ceylon (c. 1925–29)

## *Introduction*

This is a study of religion as a source of change and dynamism in the complex societies of southern India. Its main concern is with the large indigenous populations of southern India (the present-day states of Tamilnadu and Kerala) who came to identify themselves as Muslims and Christians and have therefore been tagged with the label of religious 'convert' groups. But this is an unsatisfactory term. It has sometimes implied that the coming of the major 'conversion' religions must obliterate all pre-existing beliefs and social ties amongst its new affiliates, and that the study of so-called convert communities tells us little or nothing about the supposed mainstream cultures of the non-European world.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, some authors have seen 'convert' groups as people struggling to be free of 'pagan' superstition and the supposed disabilities of caste, but irredeemably mired in them. This study seeks to challenge both of these assumptions by asking what religious conversion really meant in south Indian society over the last three centuries. What kinds of meetings and interactions occurred when practitioners of the so-called world religions encountered the values and cultural norms which already prevailed in south India? How much adaptation took place, and at what point did the followers of new doctrines and new divinities perceive themselves as members of separate 'communities'?

Of course both Islam and Christianity teach monotheism and the spiritual equality of all believers; there seems little room here for accommodation and synthesis. But was this really so? What we shall see is that in practice the two religions were capable of being radically reshaped to suit the needs of a society which revered pantheons of fierce goddesses and warrior heroes, and a social system which came increasingly to emphasise hierarchies of caste rank and inherited status. The result of these interactions was a rich array of cults, sects and confessional attachments, a process of mixing and borrowing which created remarkably sophisticated and cohesive new manifestations of Christianity and Islam. These were fully fledged and historically dynamic religious

<sup>1</sup> For a view of converts as persons who had 'excised themselves from the trunk of Indian society' see S. Arasaratnam, *Christianity, Traditional Cultures and Nationalism: The South-Asian Experience* (Jaffna, 1978), p. 11.

systems; furthermore the new traditions soon became authentically 'Indian' and are certainly not to be dismissed as alien implants from Europe and the Middle East. It follows then that south India's versions of Islam and Christianity are worth investigating, partly in their own right, as a means of adding to our understanding of the culture and social history of the subcontinent, and also for what they reveal about the wider society.

This is not a 'history of events' in the conventional sense. It is necessarily selective, both in terms of chronology and geographical span. It is not a history of belief or doctrine so much as a study of religious practice and changing social relationships. It is not a traditional history of churches, European missions and religious conversions, and it is not intended as an exhaustive overview of all Muslim and Christian 'convert' groups under the rule of south India's indigenous kings and chieftains, or in the period of European colonial supremacy. The book does seek to show that religion must be seen in its broader social context if we are to make any gains in our understanding of south Asian history. Most of the so-called convert populations to be examined here became people of great strategic and commercial importance in the states and kingdoms of Tamilnad and the Malabar coast. Such people – merchants, courtiers, military men, religious notables – all played a key role in the rise and expansion of south India's most dynamic new realms, and so in this work the story of their 'conversion' and the development of their religious culture leads on to an exploration of the complex links between religion and political power in south Indian society.

Indians have long perceived the power of divine beings as a particularly awesome form of the power which was claimed and exercised by kings and would-be rulers. The deity's shrines are seats of sovereign power; the reigning lord can not command his subjects unless he is able to control and expand his own network of sacred 'kingly' shrines. This study will show that in much of south India the shrines and divinities of the so-called convert groups were indispensable resources to the region's aspiring warrior lords. It did not matter that most of these rulers and their subjects observed forms of worship which we would now describe as Hindu; formal boundaries and orthodoxies were of little importance compared with the transforming sacred energy which was held to reside in these sites, and which could convey its powers of healing, destruction and sovereignty to all comers, regardless of affiliation or origin. This too is an important theme of the book. There are no fixed or 'traditional' identities in south Asia. Neither caste nor religious and communal affiliations can be seen as static or immutable, as part of the established 'ethnographic reality' of the subcontinent. Those who came to identify themselves, sometimes briefly and sometimes more permanently, as Christians or

Muslims, were not 'converted' from a fixed social order defined by 'traditional' Hindu religious orthodoxy and the 'traditional' rigidities of an established 'Hindu' caste system.

For this reason the book begins with an attempt to describe south India's indigenous religious and social order in a way which does not assume the existence of an all-pervading 'Hindu' culture and 'Hindu' caste system. It then seeks to explain how new states and kingdoms began to take shape in this dynamic and heterogeneous society in the period before the rise of the European colonial powers. The rest of the volume explores the way in which south Indians adopted and fashioned themes derived from Islam and Christianity to their own social and political needs, examining the forms of belief and practice which linked new groups of professing Muslims and Christians to the wider society, and discussing the political landscape in which these Indian manifestations of the 'conversion religions' took root. Chapters 2 to 6 discuss these topics in relation to south Indian Islam; chapters 7 to 11 explore the development of south Indian Christianity. In both sections the book also asks how the rise of European colonial power affected the form and content of south Indian religion. It traces the fate of pre-colonial courts and ruling groups in which the so-called converts had risen to prominence; it also describes the transformations which overtook these populations as the older warrior-ruled kingdoms broke down and colonial rule began to create new forms of caste rank and communal affiliation amongst the region's professing Muslims and Christians. The book then uses the experience of Christians and Muslims as a window through which to view the emergence of modern south India and its reactions to colonialism.

### **Religious conversion in anthropology and history**

The subject of Christian conversion and the experience of convert groups in colonial societies has been explored in several recent anthropological studies. Historical writing on Indian religious conversion has concentrated on surface events, on the beginnings of missions and the foundation of churches and mosques. This book, however, has received an important stimulus from recent anthropological works. The most sophisticated of these have shown how groups of non-Europeans have adapted the teachings of western churches for their own purposes, and have 'captured' and used the persons and authority of missionaries and other bearers of colonial culture to enhance their own forms of social organisation and royal power. This has been part of a wider effort to understand the response to colonialism from the point of view of colonised peoples, and to show that many subject groups were able to

create 'strategies of resistance' which allowed them to incorporate and transcend the intrusive impact of the trader, the missionary and the colonial administrator. There have also been attempts to reconstruct the society and world view of these groups in their own terms; it is no longer assumed that history begins for such people only after they are absorbed into the 'encompassing structures' of colonial culture and the world economy.

Jean Comaroff's study of the Tshidi people of the South Africa/Botswana borderland argues that this group should not be seen as passive victims of the colonial experience. The book describes the emergence of the flamboyant twentieth-century 'spirit churches' whose adherents '[appropriate] select signs of colonial dominance, turning historical symbols of their oppression into dynamic sources of transcendence'.<sup>2</sup> There is also an historical account of the Tshidi's first encounter with British Protestant missionaries in the early nineteenth century. This missionary enterprise was made to serve the interests of the Tshidi and their chiefs. Far from being manipulated and transformed by these foreign churchmen, the Tshidi engaged the missionaries in a complex form of material and symbolic exchange in which chiefs and foreigners conferred legitimacy upon one another; for a time, the missionaries became the junior partners in a relationship which served the interests of the local Tshidi élite.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Hidden Hippopotamus*, Gwyn Prins comes to similar conclusions about the Lozi people of the former colonial territory of Northern Rhodesia (modern-day Zambia). Here too a group of European missionaries assumed that they would take the initiative in their dealings with the chiefs of a supposedly simple subject people; according to the conventional view of the colonial experience, the impact of these Europeans' values, ideologies and material resources would bring about a fatal weakening of the subject group's social and political order. What actually happened, says Prins, was that the Lozi king Lewanika (1878–1916) transformed his first encounter with the missionaries' leader into an irreversible ritual of subordination. This hapless foreigner was tricked into performing an act of sacrifice at a great royal shrine, and the missionary who was potentially a threat to the ruler's authority was made over into a royal asset and incorporated as an affiliated subject within the domain of the king's magical sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance. The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago and London, 1985), p. 225.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–34.

<sup>4</sup> *The Hidden Hippopotamus: Reappraisal in African History. The Early Colonial Experience in Western Zambia* (Cambridge, 1980).

These two works fall into a larger category of 'ethnohistorical' studies which have sought to understand the process of so-called 'radical culture contact' in the colonial and post-colonial eras.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Marshall Sahlins has produced an anthropologically informed reconstruction of the death of the eighteenth-century explorer Captain Cook. Cook died at the hands of the Hawaiian islanders who had originally welcomed and revered him as an incarnation of the sacrificed god-king Lono. To Sahlins, these events are intelligible only in relation to the islanders' own perceptions of religious and royal power. Far from seeking to fight off a potential coloniser or a likely destroyer of their 'traditional' social order, the Hawaiians had incorporated Cook into the mythical structures of their own society. Cook himself had acquiesced in this transformation, had allowed himself to be received, posed and adorned as the god, and was killed only because he and his companions had unintentionally violated the expected sequence of events in the islanders' enactment of the Lono myth.<sup>6</sup> In another 'ethnohistorical' work, Sahlins describes a series of missionary evangelising campaigns in early nineteenth-century Fiji. Here too the missionaries became appurtenances of divine kingship, and decisions about whether to become converts were taken by Fijian chiefs on the basis of complex judgements about the viability of their moral authority and about their potential advantages in war and inter-regional political conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

South Asian anthropologists have produced relatively little work of this kind, with the exception of recent studies by R.L. Stirrat and David Mosse.<sup>8</sup> Mosse's sophisticated and provocative study uses ethnographic and historical data to describe the changing social organisation of a 'religiously plural' Hindu-Christian village in southern India. The work

<sup>5</sup> A notable recent 'ethnohistory' is Renato I. Rosaldo, *Ilongot Headhunting 1883-1974. A Study in Society and History* (Stanford, Cal., 1980). See also Nancy Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule. The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton, 1984), especially the account of Mayan Christianity, pp. 286-351.

<sup>6</sup> 'Captain James Cook; or the Dying God', in Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago and London, 1985), pp. 104-35.

<sup>7</sup> Sahlins, 'Other times, other customs: the anthropology of history', in *Islands of History*, 37-41. On 'syncretic' Christian cult traditions in Latin America, see June Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us: Dependency and Exploitation in Bolivian Tin Mines* (New York, 1979), pp. 120-69; and Michael T. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Stirrat, 'Compadrazgo in Catholic Sri Lanka', *Man* (n.s.) 10 (1975), pp. 589-606; 'Demonic possession in Catholic Sri Lanka', *Journal of Anthropological Research* 33 (1977), pp. 133-57; 'Shrines, pilgrimage and miraculous powers in Roman Catholic Sri Lanka', in W.J. Sheils, ed., *The Church and Healing: Studies in Church History*, XIX (Oxford, 1982); C.D.F. Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism: a study of social organisation and religion in rural Ramnad', unpublished D. Phil. dissertation, University of Oxford, 1986.

explores the way in which Christianity 'has become embedded in the indigenous social and religious order' of this locality and its surroundings.<sup>9</sup> It also describes the role of the village's Roman Catholic church in the articulation of a local scheme of caste rank and precedence, and shows how its sacred pantheon has been formed out of a complex interpenetration of Christian and Hindu cult traditions. In addition, Mosse deals with the way in which European missionaries participated (both willingly and unwillingly) in the creation of this elaborately 'indigenised' form of popular Tamil Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

Most historical writing on conversion and convert communities in south Asia has been concerned with very different issues. On the one hand there has been great interest in the conversion of individuals, particularly during the early phase of Christian evangelism in India. This has resulted in part from the attempt by Christian missionary organisations to create a tradition of epic history for themselves and for the fledgling Indian churches which they were seeking to lead and develop. This has meant that the history of Christianity in India was widely portrayed as the history of the mission organisations themselves; such works have concentrated on the heroic striving of their early church leaders, and on the key individuals who were first 'won for Christ' by these hardy pioneers. At the same time this focus on the individual convert has deeper roots in the history of Christian belief itself, going back to early Christian notions of conversion as *epistrophe*, a fundamental change or 'turning about' of mind and heart resulting from a deep personal awareness of Christ and a consciousness of individual sin.<sup>11</sup>

It was this individualist view of religious conversion which inspired the various northern European movements of Protestant evangelical 'revival'. In the nineteenth century these groups expressed the drive for personal salvation through a call for radical social activism; this was often realised through the founding of overseas missionary organisations, many of which developed close links to the British colonial authorities in India. As a result most historians who have adopted this mission-centred approach to conversion have sought to analyse the motivations of

<sup>9</sup> Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Compare Lionel Caplan's studies of south Indian Christianity in 'Caste and castelessness among south Indian Christians', *CIS* (n.s.) 14 (1980), pp. 213–38; 'Class and Christianity in south India', *MAS* 14 (1980), pp. 645–71; and 'The popular culture of evil in urban south India', in D. Parkin, ed., *The Anthropology of Evil* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 110–27. There is much comparable literature on African Christianity; see e.g. T.O. Ranger and J. Weller, eds., *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa* (London, 1975); T.O. Ranger and I.N. Kimambo, eds., *The Historical Study of African Religion* (London, 1972); George Bond, W. Johnson and S.S. Walker, eds., *African Christianity. Patterns of Religious Continuity* (New York and London, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New York, 1967), IV, pp. 286–92; IX, p. 724.

individual converts; such work has usually assumed a complete mental and spiritual divide between the individual convert and the beliefs and traditions of the wider society from which he or she is thought to have been removed.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast there are other accounts of Indian Christianity which have concentrated on the so-called 'mass movements' through which large numbers of Indians underwent a collective or corporate conversion to Christianity after having made contact with one of these European missionary groups. Here 'conversion' is seen not only as an individual act but as a social process; an attempt is made to understand the social context in which the conversions have taken place. However, such works have concentrated on nineteenth-century mass movements and on groups, especially members of low and 'untouchable' castes, who were converted by Protestant evangelical missionaries. Most of these studies have overlooked the importance of the large-scale mass conversions which took place during much earlier periods of Roman Catholic missionary activity in India. As a result they have explained religious conversion in terms of the ideologies of social egalitarianism and social improvement which are supposed to have gained currency in the age of British colonial rule. It has been assumed that conversions took place as a means of escaping the social 'disabilities' which were experienced by people of low standing in a static and hierarchically ranked caste society. Like their missionary patrons, these converts are supposed to have aimed at the creation of a separate and 'modernised' social order in which 'conscience', public worship and socially generated ideas of charity replaced 'traditional' Indian principles of status and inherited spiritual worth.<sup>13</sup>

This book takes an altogether different approach. Its chapters on south

<sup>12</sup> For a more sophisticated account of convert mentalities, see Dennis Hudson, 'The life and times of H.A. Krishna Pillai (1827–1900): a study in the encounter of Tamil Sri Vaishnava Hinduism and evangelical Protestant Christianity in nineteenth-century Tirunelveli District', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate School and University Centre, 1970.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Frykenberg's work on south Indian Christians has focused on Protestant 'convert' groups: see 'The impact of conversion and social reform' in C.H. Philips and M.D. Wainwright, eds., *Indian Society and the Beginnings of Modernization c. 1830–1850* (London, 1976), pp. 187–243. See also Frykenberg, 'On the study of conversion movements', *IESHR* 17 (1981), pp. 121–38; Henry Whitehead, 'The mass movements towards Christianity in the Punjab', *International Review of Missions* 2 (1913), pp. 442–53; James C. Manor, 'Testing the barrier between caste and outcaste: the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church in Guntur District' 1920–1940, *ICHR* 5:1 (1971), pp. 27–41; G.A. Oddie, 'Christian conversion in Telugu country, 1860–1900: a case study of one Protestant movement in the Godavery–Krishna Delta', *IESHR* 12:1 (1975), pp. 61–79; Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity, Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India* (London, 1980). And see articles in the *CMS Mass Movement Quarterly* 1–30 (1917–47).

Indian Christians concentrate on groups who did not opt out of the indigenous moral order; on the contrary, the behaviour and social organisation of these converts continued to reflect perceptions of caste rank, 'honour' and ritual precedence which were shared throughout the wider society of the two regions. (For a discussion of these concepts see below, p. 35.) Such groups did not necessarily receive Christianity as a consequence of European colonial domination, and again it must not be assumed that European expansion was the sole historical force affecting Christian converts or the wider society of south India. These people did see themselves as Christians and were recognised as persons of distinct and separate religious identity. Even so they were not identified as an isolated 'minority' community cut off from the rest of the south Indian population so much as a Christian sect or caste within that society, and one which retained many critical south Indian notions, particularly those which concerned the nature of divine power and the supernatural.

What did conversion mean for such groups, and what determined the depth and nature of their relationships with other communities around them? The first of the Christian groups to be considered here are the St Thomas Christians of Kerala, a Malayalam-speaking population whose Christian identity dates from before the sixth-century AD. These Indian Christians were clearly not a product of western European evangelising. For many centuries before the rise of the colonial powers, they were accepted as a community of high caste rank within the elaborate schemes of social and ceremonial precedence which were presided over by local kings – that is by rulers who would now be described as orthodox Hindus. This position was guaranteed by the group's rights of participation in prestigious Hindu religious ceremonies, and these bonds survived intact as long as the region's powerful warrior kingdoms retained their independent suzerainty. By studying this 'convert' population, it is possible to trace the changing links between political and religious power in south India, to ask how far these relationships were altered by the expansion of European colonial power, and like Mosse, to explore both the intentional and unintentional interweaving of Hindu and Christian cult worship.<sup>14</sup>

The second Christian group to be discussed are the Tamil-speaking Paravas of the Coromandel coast, and as in the case of the St Thomas Christians, their case raises important questions about the relationship between 'converts' and the wider religious culture of south India. As clients and protégés of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, the

<sup>14</sup> As elsewhere in the text, 'Hindu' is used to denote forms of worship which would now be seen as belonging to the traditions of formal theistic Hinduism.

Paravas became professing Roman Catholics in one of the earliest of the corporate or mass conversions to take place in India under the aegis of the colonial state. These people too retained many of the distinctive features of their earlier social and religious life. Once again, Christianity was not a barrier which separated the group from the rest of the society; instead it provided them with a new code of behaviour, a 'caste lifestyle' which ordered their marriage patterns and domestic ritual practices like that of any other south Indian caste group. The Paravas were deeply influenced by the policies and pronouncements of their European priests and missionaries, but these foreigners soon realised that, for the Paravas, they were not all-powerful purveyors of religious truth, and that their teachings were being modified to suit the society and indigenous sacred landscape in which the Paravas made their home. The consequence of this was a form of interaction which recalls the developments described by Comaroff, Prins and Sahlins. The Paravas were determined to manage and transform the power of their foreign priests, and to adapt this power to support the strategies of their own indigenous status system. What then were these strategies? At what level and why did the community maintain connections with their non-Parava neighbours? What finally was the meaning of conversion for this 'convert' group?

Finally the book takes a group of Christian communities in the dry interior of Tamilnadu and studies the evolution of their religious and social life in the late seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In these hinterland regions neither Tamil Hinduism nor Islam had assumed the ordered hierarchical form characteristic of the more populous settled rice-growing and coastal lands. Here shifting and informal groups of devotees gradually formed around the veneration of Christian cult saints and charismatic Christian holy men. Such people were initially absorbed into the practices of indigenous religion; like the Hindu devotional or *bhakti* sects to which they were related, these early cult groups tended to become an established part of the region's sacred networks if they succeeded in attracting the patronage of the region's powerful Hindu warrior chieftains.

Once again we see that religion and the history of 'convert' groups is best discussed in relation to the organisation of state power in south Asia. In this hinterland country Christianity became a religion of sect and warrior, adjusting once again to the cultural traditions and social organisation of the people amongst whom it took root. Thus in each case, a study of the nature of Christian converts leads ultimately to a closer investigation of the wider society, but from an angle that emphasises change, the creation of tradition and the lack of any pre-ordained teleology in the creation of an indigenous south Indian religious tradition.

It cannot be assumed that Christianity was bound to fail in south India, or that south Indians were necessarily and from some ancient period 'Hindus' in the sense in which the term is understood today.

### The meaning of conversion in the Muslim world

As for Christianity in the subcontinent, there has also been extensive anthropological work on south Asian Islam, much of which has sought to place the subcontinent's Muslims within a broader social context. It has been shown, for example, that Indian Muslims have developed their own distinctive manifestations of Islam, and that this has involved a fusion of Hindu and Muslim 'folk' worship with the practices and teachings of the high or 'orthodox' Islamic tradition.<sup>15</sup> Recent work on Muslims in Nepal has also illuminated the complex accommodations which have taken place as the practice of Islam has been adjusted to fit the particular milieu in which it has taken root.<sup>16</sup> Above all, scholars who have dealt with the Indian inheritance of Sufism, the Islamic mystical tradition, have shown that the development of Sufi devotional worship with its associated shrines, cult saints and teaching orders was a phenomenon which helped to make Indian Islam particularly responsive to changes in Hindu society and polity.<sup>17</sup>

Among the historians, those who have studied India's distinctive regional cultures have established that the practice of Islam and many of the popular mentalities which supported it were shaped and moulded by the 'folk' and 'élite' religion of the wider Hindu (or non-Muslim) society. Richard Eaton has done pioneering work of this kind on Muslim society in the Deccan, the Punjab and Bengal.<sup>18</sup> Using popular Bengali ballads

<sup>15</sup> Imtiaz Ahmad, ed., *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims in India* (New Delhi, 1973); *Family, Kinship and Marriage among the Muslims in India* (New Delhi, 1976); 'The Islamic tradition in India', *Islam in the Modern Age* 12: 1 (1981), pp. 44–62; *Ritual and Religion among Muslims in India* (New Delhi, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> Marc Gaborieau, 'Le Culte des saints chez les musulmans au Nepal et en Inde du Nord', *Social Compass*, Louvain, 25: 3–4 (1978), pp. 477–94; 'Muslims in the Hindu kingdom of Nepal', *CIS* (n.s.) 6 (1972); 'Légende et culte du saint musulman Ghazi Miya au Nepal occidental et en Inde', *Objects et Mondes*, 15: 3 (1975), pp. 289–318; 'The cult of saints among Muslims in Nepal and Northern India', in Stephen Wilson, ed., *Saints and their Cults* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> See particularly Richard Maxwell Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur 1300–1700. Social Roles of Sufis in Mediaeval India* (Princeton, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; Eaton, 'The political and religious authority of the shrine of Baba Farid in Pakpattan, Punjab', in B. Metcalf, ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), pp. 333–56; 'Islam in Bengal', in George Michel, ed., *The Islamic Heritage in Bengal* (Paris, 1984), pp. 23–36; 'Court of man, Court of god', in Richard C. Martin, ed., *Islam in Local Contexts. Contributions to Asian Studies XVII* (Leiden, 1982), pp. 44–61. See also D.F. Eickelman, 'The study of Islam in local contexts', in *ibid.*, pp. 1–16.

and didactic texts, Azim Roy has shown how Muslims in Bengal evolved a tradition of worship in which Muslim *pīr* or saint cults converged and overlapped with the veneration of local guardian and hero divinities. This aspect of Roy's work has much in common with the discussion of south Indian devotional cults in chapters 3 to 6 of this book.<sup>19</sup> By contrast Stephen Dale's work on the Mappilas of Malabar deals with a region in which the local Muslim population appears to exhibit all the characteristic features of an exclusive and militantly separatist Indian Muslim society. Here too though, there were strong links with the Hindu sacred landscape; these were displayed for example in the celebration of local *nerccas* (cult commemoration ceremonies) which replicate the main rites of Malayali Hindu festivals.<sup>20</sup>

One of the strengths of these works is the fact that they have attempted to describe Indian variants of Muslim practice and belief on their own terms, rather than as 'degenerate' or 'superstitious' deviations from the so-called Islamic norm (a concept which is usually applied to the forms of Islam which are now current in the Middle East.) This approach is comparable to that taken by leading historians of Indonesia, a more fully 'Islamised' region, but one in which Hindu and Buddhist themes, particularly themes associated with the court and the magical force of its kings, were able to strengthen and reinforce Islamic identification amongst the islands' Muslim convert groups.<sup>21</sup>

All the same, many historical studies, particularly those which take a broad view of Islamic history, have tended to adopt a simple teleology, whereby eighteenth-century Muslim reform and 'revival' are followed by nineteenth-century communal organisation and then by Islamic 'fundamentalism' in the twentieth-century.<sup>22</sup> In contrast the chapters on Muslims in this book are intended to serve a number of purposes. First, their aim is to show that Muslim communities were still being actively implanted and built up in the Tamil-speaking regions of south India

<sup>19</sup> Azim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, 1983), pp. 208–48.

<sup>20</sup> S.F. Dale and M. Gangadhara Menon, 'Nerccas: saint-martyr worship among the Muslims of Kerala', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 41:3 (1978), pp. 523–38.

<sup>21</sup> M.C. Ricklefs, *Jogjakarta Under Sultan Mangkubumi 1749–1792. A History of the Division of Java* (London, 1974); Ricklefs, *History of Modern Indonesia* (London, 1982); P.B.R. Carey, *Babad Dipanagara. An Account of the Outbreak of the Java War (1825–30)* (Kuala Lumpur, 1981); Carey, 'Ratu Adil': the origin of the Java War (1825–30)', *English Historical Review* 1:41 (1976).

<sup>22</sup> See Francis Robinson, 'Islam and Muslim society in South Asia', *CIS* (n.s.) 17:2 (1983), pp. 185–203; Veena Das, 'For a folk-theology and a theological anthropology of Islam', in *CIS* 18:2 (1984), pp. 293–300; Gail Minault, 'Some reflections on Islamic revivalism vs. assimilation among Muslims in India', *ibid.* pp. 300–5.

during the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. More generally, it is argued that Islam continued to act as a dynamic force within the wider society of the south; this was at a time when north Indian Muslim culture was thought to be in decline as a consequence of the collapse of Mughal power and the reassertion of Hindu or 'Brahmanical' forms of kingship throughout the subcontinent.

In the Tamil country, some of the same processes of Islamic expansion which had helped to foster traditions of Muslim identity in the north at a much earlier time were now leading many local people to identify themselves with a tradition of formal Muslim adherence. As chapters 2 and 3 will show, the spread of Sufism, and in particular the appeal of the unorganised or non-institutional Muslim mystical traditions with their wandering saints of the forest and uncleared 'fringe' country, served as a powerful medium for the transmission of basic Muslim practices to the region's unsettled cattle-keepers and martial predator groups. This unorganised 'fringe' domain of Muslim expansion was closely associated with incoming military groups and with their supporters and recruits amongst the local pastoral and warrior populations. Once again, therefore, the book will explore the nature of state power and the role of 'convert' religious traditions in securing the claims of new and aspiring rulers. It will be seen that the expansion of this Muslim military culture resulted from the long process of state building in south India. The armies of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Hindu domain of Vijayanagar and its regional successor kingdoms had included many Muslim military specialists, and over the next three centuries many north Indian and Deccani soldiers and their associated Muslim service communities migrated to the south. These developments culminated in the creation after 1710 of the formally Muslim nawabi or Mughal province (later an independent royal domain) of Arcot.

A more ancient medium by which Islam spread to south India was through the agency of trade and sea-based trading people. From as early as the ninth or tenth century AD the Coromandel coast contained maritime Muslim communities which had close links with the Middle East (and later with the Islamized trading entrepôts of southeast Asia). The élite trading people who were based in these centres created a distinctive Tamil-Arabic culture which rivalled that of the Mappila pepper ports of Malabar. In the course of time these Muslim traders who were known as *maraikkāyar* became more closely involved in internal trade, and Muslim communities began to grow up in most of the major artisan and commercial centres in Tamilnad. Like the Christian of the west coast, the most prominent of these merchants became subordinate co-shares in royal schemes of patronage and affiliation. They also

developed close links with the region's powerful Hindu temples and festival rites.

The chapters on south Indian Islam also seek to show what forces determined the reception of Muslim belief and practice in south India. It has been assumed that, like conversion to Christianity, Muslim conversion was a product of egalitarian religious and social teachings, or of attempts by subordinate communities to distance themselves from Hindu caste 'disabilities'. Once again, though, 'conversion' cannot be taken to imply a simple all-or-nothing shift of individual conviction or communal affiliation. As will be seen in chapters 2, 3 and 4, south India too evolved variants of Islam which were rich, dynamic and flexible, and which were marked by a very striking capacity to accommodate themselves to indigenous patterns of faith and worship. This then is the key to understanding the spread of Islam. We shall see that the faith took root in south India as local people attached themselves to teachers, soldiers and divinely empowered holy men who were identified as professing Muslims; such figures were linked with 'Hindu' cult divinities and were perceived both as figures of power and healing and also as bringers of sickness and destruction. Thus it was not the egalitarian message of Islam so much as the power or sacred energy which was held to be inherent in its bearers, which initiated the process of Islamic 'conversion' in south India.

At the same time these historical changes, which often took place in periods of great flux and conflict, have implications for teleological views of Muslim conversion. In much of south India warrior figures, beings of protective and destructive supernatural power, remained as important in the later stages of Muslim expansion as they had in its early days of implantation and development. Throughout the eighteenth-century there were flourishing devotional traditions associated with the activities of south India's locally based learned and literary Sufis; at the same time the power of the divinely endowed warriors and forest cult saints continued to attract devotees from all levels of the society. There was no sequence by which Islam moved from a warrior phase to a series of courtly and scriptural phases. Beings from this locally generated pantheon of cult heroes and supernatural royal conquerors became domesticated into the courtly Islamic milieu of the nawabs of Arcot, just as learned Sufis and *ulama* (Quranic scholars) continued to be identified as objects of ecstatic cult veneration. Although the Tamil country did generate some proponents of puritanical Islamic 'reform' or 'revivalism' (see below, pp. 180-1) the expansion of new Muslim states in south India also helped to foster the growth of powerful warrior cult traditions; these were often closely linked to the founding and patronage of élite or 'high' Islamic teaching establishments.

Rather than eliminating indigenous forms of faith and worship in south India, the Islamic impact seems generally to have broadened and deepened these forms. Again, this raises the question of what conversion really meant in such a setting. Throughout the Muslim world, adherence to Islam need not necessarily involve a shift in belief, that is an attempt to conform to standards which are accepted as being 'orthodox' in form and content. Instead of orthodoxy, it has been suggested that the key word here should be orthopraxy, conformity of practice which leads the professing Muslim to adhere to a standard of identifiable Muslim behaviour. What this has meant is that in most of the Asian and African societies where Islam has taken root, considerable latitude has been allowed once members of the emerging Muslim community have made the initial profession of faith and have then attempted to assume certain basic forms of observance such as those which govern the recitation of prayer, the operation of mosques, the practice of circumcision and certain key marriage forms.<sup>23</sup>

In India as in other parts of the Muslim world, this view of the 'convert's' duties has made it possible for existing forms of worship and devotion to be carried on alongside conventional 'Islamic' observances. Muslim saint cult festivals were slotted into the region's existing Hindu sacred calendar; in the Tamil country, as chapter 3 will show, such celebrations were organised on similar principles to those of local Hindu temple rites. There was also the development of a local literary and devotional tradition through which professing Muslims incorporated Quranic themes with motifs and perceptions of divine power derived from the Hindu scriptures and from the myths and legends of south India's fierce blood-taking goddesses and 'demonic' male power divinities.

This sharing of ideas and practices makes the whole phenomenon of religious conversion much more intelligible. As in the case of Christianity, so far as Islam succeeded in taking root in south India, it did so because of its capacity to forge links with the religions and peoples of the wider society, to offer a form of access to the divine which could be grasped and built upon through means which were already present within these societies. When this interpenetration took place, it was neither 'degenerate' nor a product of superficial 'accretions' from Hinduism. In south India this sharing of belief and practice was built up into a dynamic and expansive religious system, and it deserves to be understood in its own right rather than as a hangover from the convert's past which must inevitably fade away as soon as the local Muslim population becomes

<sup>23</sup> Robinson, 'Islam and Muslim society', p. 189.

more fully Islamic. South India has never had any single movement or trend which can be identified as a drive for Islamic 'fundamentalism', and while self-styled individual reformists and purifiers have been at work in the region, their impact on contemporary Muslim society should not be read back into the developments of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries.

Finally, however, the chapters on Muslims in south India seek to address another problem, which is the limitations or constraints which ultimately halted the further development of Muslim communities in the region. Why was it that Tamilnad, which was able to generate such a dynamic tradition of Muslim faith and worship, did not become a more fully Islamised society like Bengal or the Punjab, or like the flexible and accommodating Muslim cultures of Java? Once again this is a question which unites the themes of religious and political power as they were perceived and acted upon in south Indian society. The answer lies partly in the impact of the colonial state which from the middle of the eighteenth-century began to limit and constrain the activities both of the Muslim court and also of the expansive south Indian warrior tradition. At the same time, the continued development of the so-called 'little kingdoms' of the Tamil country and their appropriation of the themes and deities of the great Hindu temples appear to provide a more powerful explanation for the limitation of Muslim conversion in the south. It was not that south India was for all time an 'orthodox' Hindu society; on the contrary, Christianity, Islam and Brahmanical Hinduism were forces which all came to impinge on the warrior cultures of south India at the same time. The warrior kings and the new rulers of the wet rice-growing zones all found the 'high' Hindu traditions of the temples more appropriate to their new status and aspirations.



## *Part I*



## *South Indian religion and society*

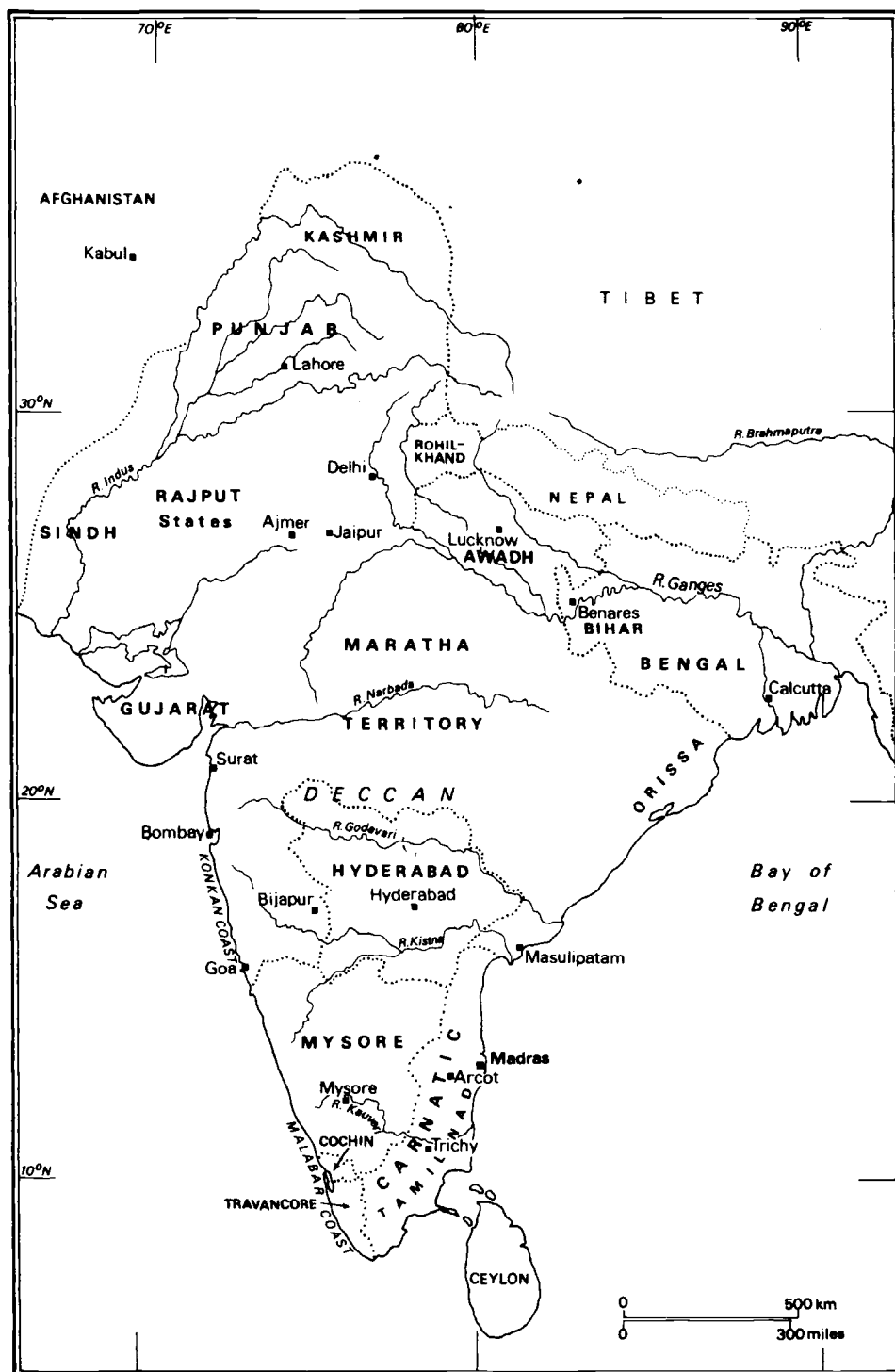
### **Introduction**

This chapter is intended as a broad introduction to the religion, society and pre-colonial political traditions of south India. It concentrates on those features of the region's culture and social organisation which bear directly on the main themes of the book; its aim is to provide essential background information for the discussion of south India's indigenous 'convert' communities.

South India is a land of two contrasting natural environments. For at least 1,500 years intensive rice cultivation has been practised in the fertile river valleys and deltas of the Tamil country and along the lush maritime strip of the Malabar coast (now known as Kerala). Through the development of sophisticated water management techniques, these paddy-growing areas became the 'core zones' of a rich agricultural and trading economy with strong links with the maritime entrepôts of west Asia and the far east. By the tenth-century AD five powerful kingdoms had been founded in the most productive of these areas, that is in the territories known as the 'wet south'. Their rulers belonged to powerful land-controlling groups who gradually formed into loosely organised caste groupings or status categories such as the Vellalas of Tamilnad and the arms-bearing Nayars of the Malabar coast.

Most of the people who claimed the right to use these titles had adopted new gods and hierarchical social conventions from priestly Brahman groups who had been settling in these favoured agricultural regions from before the first century AD. The Vellalas' and Nayars' partnerships with these superior ritualists reinforced their control over populations of ritually subordinated agrarian labourers (so-called untouchables) whose low rank in this emerging social order was reflected in the use of caste titles which came to denote servility and dependence – Pallars, Pallis (Vanniyars), Paraiyans and Cakkalaiyars in the Tamil country, Cherumas and Pulayas in Kerala.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Delhi, 1980); Christopher John Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy 1880–1955. The Tamilnad countryside* (Delhi, 1984), pp. 19–46; David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*



Map 1. India in 1765.

Of the rulers who came from the region's élite wet-zone 'peasant' ranks, the Cholas achieved the greatest power. Like all mediaeval south Indian kings they shared their authority with large numbers of chiefs and petty lords, and this loosely textured state system has come to be described as a 'segmentary' political order.<sup>2</sup> Chola rule was centred on the densely settled rice lands of the river Kauveri in modern-day Tanjore (Tanjavur) and Trichy (Tiruccirapalli, Trichinopoly). The Cholas' Pandya neighbours ruled from the Tambraparni and Vaigai basins with the ancient temple city of Madurai as their capital, and the Pallavas were based at Kanchi (Conjeeveram) in the area known as Tondaimandalam in the Palar valley.

The kingdom of the Cheras was built up on the Malabar coast. This area had its own distinctive political and social tradition. Here a greater share of power had come to be concentrated in the hands of local chiefs or 'port kings' whose resources were derived from a dynamic maritime trading economy which had been formed as early as the first or second centuries BC around the export of the region's pepper and other valuable forest products. The special features of this society will be discussed in chapter 7; at this point what must be stressed are the institutions which Kerala held in common with other areas of the wet south.

Through the patronage of its rulers and the lesser lords and petty kings who exchanged tokens of sovereignty and overlordship with them, the wet south became a domain of rich Brahman enclaves (*brahmadēyas*) and spectacular stone-built Hindu temples.<sup>3</sup> The period of Chola rule in particular is remembered as the high point of mediaeval south Indian art and architecture. Because of the spectacular wealth and opulent rituals of the wet zones' royal shrines, and because of their comparatively stratified schemes of caste rank and precedence, south India has come to be thought of as a bastion of 'orthodox' or 'Sanskritic' Hindu worship.

Much of this study, however, will focus on the second of south India's two ecological and social milieus, the so-called 'dry south'. The contrast between the societies which developed in these two regions is much like the division between the unsettled and the sown that has been noted for many other non-European societies. In the period of Chola, Pandya and Pallava rule, as in the lands of north African Arab and Berber or north

(Princeton, 1985) pp. 15–46. The bond between the martial Nayars and élite Nambudiri Brahmans of Kerala probably developed as late as the twelfth or thirteenth century. See Ronald M. Bernier, *Temple Arts of Kerala. A Southern Tradition* (New Delhi, 1982), p. 32. On 'untouchable' agrarian groups see BOR vol. 827/8 July 1819/33/pp. 5678–86/TNA.

<sup>2</sup> Stein, *Peasant State*, pp. 254–365.

<sup>3</sup> On Kerala's distinctive temple architecture see Bernier, *Temple Arts of Kerala*, and V.R. Parameswaran Pillai, *Temple Culture of South India* (New Delhi, 1986).

Indian Jat and Gujar (indigenous Hindi speaking 'peasants' and nomadic pastoralists), most of the territories outside the favoured deltas and river valleys remained an unsettled world inhabited largely by martial predators, forest and hill-dwelling hunter-gatherers and predatory cattle-keeping plainsmen such as the Kallars, Maravas and Akamutaiyars of the southern Tamil country.<sup>4</sup>

The settled agrarian world, the world of townsmen and farming folk, had many links to this unsettled realm, but there was always great tension between the two. Ernest Gellner has described broadly similar confrontations within the Muslim societies of north Africa.<sup>5</sup> Here too warrior pastoralists, desert nomads in this case, were known as plunderers of the settled order, but they also supplied the settled ruler with animal products, livestock and military manpower. They entered into complex transactions with the merchants, political élites and religious experts of the urban milieu, and the founders of new expansive ruling lines were often recruited from the ranks of these dynamic martial 'fringe' peoples.

There are major differences between Gellner's desert tribes and south India's loose groupings of so-called 'tribals', raiders and cattle-keepers with their clubs and boomerangs, their blood-drinking power divinities and their much sought-after military skills. But in south India too, the people of the wet zones came to have closer social ties with the inhabitants of this so-called fringe country, particularly in areas such as Kongunad (the dry tracts of modern Salem and Coimbatore districts), the Kallar-dominated Pudukkottai tract which formed a frontier between the Pandya and Chola cores, and the Marava plains country of Ramnad and Sivagangai to the north of the Tambraparni.<sup>6</sup> In Tamilnad the Vellala lords of the valleys recruited the dry zones' martial predators into their armies and tried to expand their ritualised alliance systems so as to include some of the chiefs and clan heads of the forests and plains. At the same time there were conflicts between settled and pastoral groups as the wet zones' ruling groups encouraged the expansion of paddy cultivation into lands on the less favoured outskirts of the rice belt.

All this means that there was nothing finished or static about the society of pre-colonial south India. Even before the great waves of invasion and settlement which took place after the decline of the great mediaeval

<sup>4</sup> Akamutaiyars (Cervarars) are another of the Muventar Kulam (Tamil warrior groups). See Louis Dumont, *Une Sous-Caste de L'Inde du Sud. Organisation sociale et religion des Pramalai Kallar* (Paris, The Hague, 1957), pp. 5-7; Nicholas Dirks, 'The structure and meaning of political relations in a south Indian little kingdom', pp. 182-5 in *CIS* (n.s.) 13:2 (1979), pp. 169-206.

<sup>5</sup> On these see Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 16-85.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Dumont, *Une Sous-Caste*. In Malabar similar interactions and tensions divided the port kingdoms of the coastal lowlands and the forest country of the western Ghats with its 'tribal' hunter-gatherers and slash and burn agriculturalists.

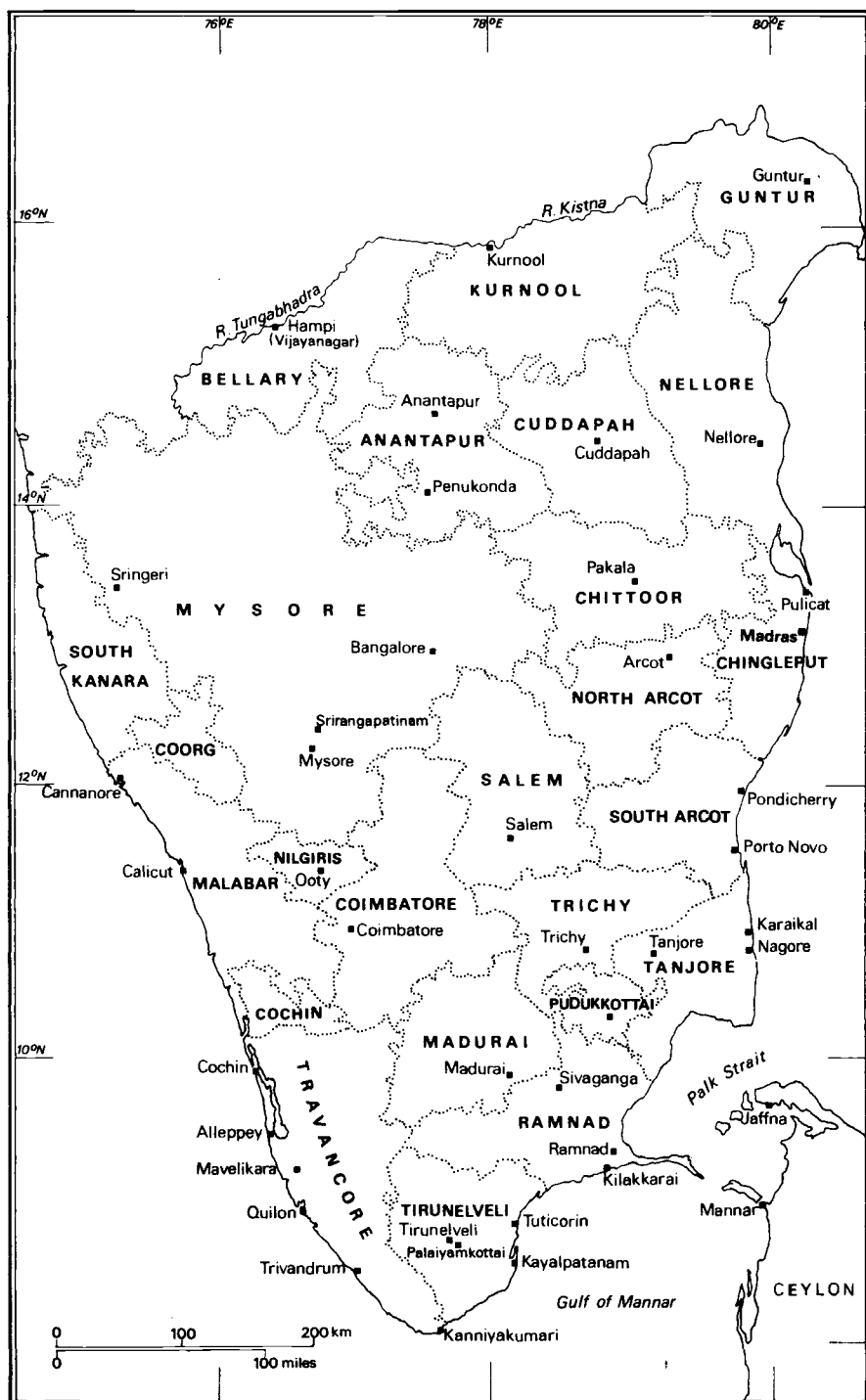
kingdoms, men from the plains and forest 'fringes' were pushing into the wet 'core' territories, receiving new traditions and religious symbols from the valley culture and leaving their own marks on the societies of the rice belt. These penetrations became even more widespread from the middle of the fourteenth century after the old indigenous dynasties had been swept away and a great influx of warriors and peasant colonists began to flood into the Tamil country.

These 'Vadugas' or northerners – mostly Telugu speakers from the southern reaches of the Deccan – transformed the political organisation of south India and greatly enhanced the power and importance of the dry-zone warrior groups. By the early seventeenth century these newcomers, who were known as *nāyakas*, had consolidated dynamic new states around Madurai, Trichy, Tanjore and the other old wet-zone dynastic centres.<sup>7</sup> Nayaka rule brought about a much greater degree of contact between the settled people of the rice belt and the unsettled incomers and martial predators of the dry plains. These regimes and those of their eighteenth-century successors (the petty chiefs and warlords known as poligars) depended on the capacity to field large well-trained armies. Their forces were largely manned with Kallar and Marava warriors, and the nayaka and poligar rulers looked to the region's unsettled pastoralists and forest dwellers to supply them with pack bullocks, war elephants and saleable jungle products such as hardwoods and spices.

In order to finance their armies these rulers required a rapidly expanding volume of cash revenue. This could only be achieved through a process of rapid commercialisation, and so the nayakas and their local agents recruited groups of merchants, money-lenders and literate record keepers to their new domains. With the support of such immigrant client groups as the commercial Komatis they fostered close links between the paddy market and the collection of land revenue. They also built up the region's ancient textile trade by bringing in weavers and other artisans, expanding production sites and founding new specialist weaving centres populated by Kaikkolars and other local specialists and by migrants such as the Kannada and Telugu-speaking Devangas and Seniyans and the Gujarati-speaking Patnulkaran silk weavers from Saurashtra.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> These immigrant military notables were supposed to channel tribute payments and warrior recruits to their 'imperial' overlords. Their original suzerains were the warrior dynasts who ruled from the royal capital of Vijayanagar ('city of victory') at Hampi in the Deccan (c. 1365–1532). The Vijayanagar 'empire' was really a loose grid of military overlordships. Stein, *Peasant State*, pp. 366–488; and Stein, 'Reapproaching Vijayanagara', in R.E. Frykenberg and P. Kolenda, eds., *Studies of South India. An Anthology of Recent Research and Scholarship* (Madras, 1985), pp. 31–50.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Turnbull, 'Geographical and Statistical Memoir of Tirunelveli and its Zemindaries' [c. 1823] Revenue Department Sundries, No. 38, TNA, p. 28; B.S. Baliga, *Madras District Gazetteers. Madurai* (Madras, 1960), p. 136; Collector of



Map 2. The Madras Presidency showing district boundaries.

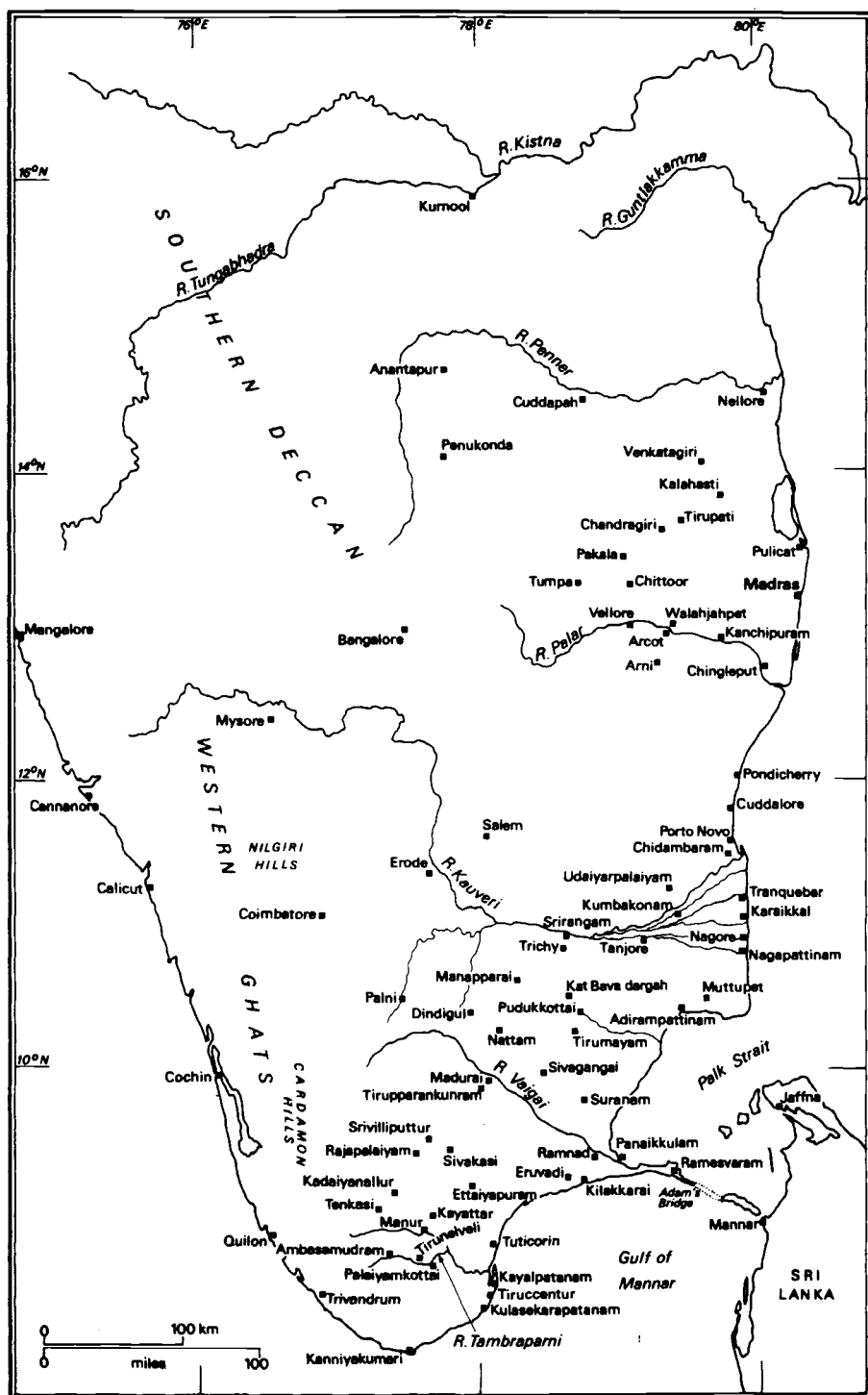
It was also found that with the right techniques, many of the south's sparsely settled dry tracts were capable of producing valuable cash crops. Thus in addition to the great bands of soldiers and military retainers who had followed them from the Andhra plains and the Deccan, the nayakas brought in specialist agricultural groups to expand the frontiers of cultivation in the Tamil country. Among these incomers were large numbers of Shanars, natives of the sandy *teri* tracts of southeastern Tamilnad, who used their experience in digging wells for the *teri*'s palmyra trees to begin growing paddy, chilis and other well-dependent 'garden' crops in the Tirunelveli red-soil country.<sup>9</sup> Other 'fringe' areas came under cultivation in this period when Kammass and Reddis – men with the same peasant-warrior background as the nayakas themselves – were settled in the Tamil dry zone. These Telugu cultivators had the skills required to deal with the region's rich but difficult black soils. The wide open tracts of 'fine deep black mould' in these areas were now put under the plough for the first time and were soon producing luxuriant crops of cotton and tobacco, as well as lucrative food products such as chillies and coriander.<sup>10</sup>

These incoming peasant groups possessed few of the features which have come to be associated with the 'traditional' caste systems of south Asia. Like the Maravas, Kallars and other unsettled or semi-nomadic martial groups of the Tamil country, these black- and red-soil cultivators belonged to a world of comparatively unstratified segmentary clans and tribal groupings, and their gods and social conventions were only distantly related to those of the more 'Sanskritic' valley peoples. In fact, though, even in the rich agrarian zones of the south there was much that was still open and fluid about the region's social order in this period of nayaka and poligar rule. In Malabar at this time the élite Nayar caste grouping was still an amorphous status category rather than a series of closed corporate units with a fixed sense of 'primordial identity'. Even the Tamil 'wet zone' was not just a land of established 'peasant' and Brahman settlements dating back to the first centuries of organised rice cultivation:

Southern Peshkash' [poligar tribute] to BOR, March 1793/BOR vol. 81/6/ p. 6939/TNA. On the Tamil Kaikkolars see Mattison Mines, *The Warrior Merchants. Textiles, Trade and Territory in South India* (Cambridge, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Ludden, *Peasant History*, pp. 45–75. The Tamil Shanars had much in common with the Malayali Ezhavas and Tiyyans. Their involvement in the ritually polluting occupation of toddy tapping (the manufacture of country liquor) meant that they were defined as persons of low or '*avarana*' caste within the region's Brahmanical ranking schemes.

<sup>10</sup> Turnbull, (Memoir) pp. 91–4, and see Ludden, *Peasant History*, pp. 50–67. H.R. Pate, *Madras District Gazetteers. Tinnevely*, I, (Madras, 1917), pp. 142–3, 155–62. On migrations of dry-zone agricultural groups within Tamilnad, see e.g. Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', p. 60.



Map 3. Muslim religious centres and associated sites.

many of its major population centres were places of relatively recent foundation, or were sites which had been entirely transformed by the nayakas' and poligars' recruitment of outside artisans, warriors and other specialist groups. Until well into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the 'sedentarisation' of immigrant and non-peasant populations was a slow and uneven process in many of these south Indian agricultural tracts, and even well into the colonial period the line dividing unsettled and cultivating peoples was often ill-defined and uncertain.<sup>11</sup>

### **The foundation of south Indian religious life: goddesses and male power divinities**

Given this history of continuous population movements and rapid changes in the political order, south India was clearly far from being a static and homogeneous society in the immediate pre-colonial period. It would be wrong to see its culture as being shaped solely by the economic and social dominance of the wet zones' Tamil Brahman and Vellala élites, or by the 'Sanskritic' culture of the Nambudiri Brahmans and other élite Malayali landholding groups. The first questions to ask about these regions, then, is what kind of deities their people worshipped in the period of nayaka and poligar rule, how their religious life was organised and what underlying principles gave order and meaning to their systems of faith and worship.

The key figures for almost all south Indians were (and still are) a group of beings who may be described as divinities of blood and power. These were deities who partook of all the passions and uncontained generative forces which coloured everyday human experience, and could therefore be appealed to in times of specific ills and afflictions. But although many of these power deities were recognised as healers and protectors, they were never wholly beneficent like some of the region's so-called 'pure' or 'high' gods, and they all had a fierce and malevolent side. For example, most of the power divinities had the capacity to possess living men and women. Sometimes these visitations were actively sought by their devotees: at many south Indian goddess festivals specialist *sāmiyādis* (god-dancers) engage in ecstatic trance dancing so as to induce the deity to enter into them and use them as a medium of prophecy. Very often, though, possession is uninvited, a source of torment and debilitation

<sup>11</sup> The nayakas founded many of the river valleys' most extensive Brahman settlements. The large-scale recruitment of Brahmans into the Tamil 'wet zone' is noted in Turnbull, 'Memoir', pp. 35–7, 46.

which can only be relieved if the sufferer undergoes elaborate rites of exorcism.<sup>12</sup>

South India's blood and power divinities can be divided into two main categories. The first of these are the goddesses or *amman*s, including Mariyamman (or Muttumariyamman) the bringer of smallpox and fever, Bhagavati the divine female warrior of Malabar, and the spear-wielding Durga who fights a savage blood-drenched battle against the buffalo demon Mahisasura. These battles were (and still are) crucial to the south Indian goddess tradition. The amman is divine power activated. Although all beings possess some measure of *sakti* (divine power or energy: 'the visible energy of the divine essence symbolised as a female') it is she who actually takes up the fight which is waged throughout time on behalf of all beings in the cosmos.<sup>13</sup> The goddess is therefore possessed of an extra endowment of *sakti* in order to contend with the 'demonic' world. This world is the domain of lust, sin, pollution and greed, and indeed of all the menacing and contaminating elements which are always at hand to threaten the harmony of the created universe.

The iconography of the goddess has been remarkably consistent since Pallava and Chola times. In paintings and temple carvings all over south India the figure of Durga is shown as a beautiful young warrior, eerily smiling and serene as she sits astride her lion, the demon's severed head clutched in her hand with his body lying trampled and bleeding at her feet. But for all its gore and drama the goddess's victory is never absolute, and these confrontations are not to be equated with the western idea of the battle between good and evil or the triumph of the divine over the satanic. The demon enemy is not 'evil' in any conventional Judaeo-Christian sense: there is no real opposition here. On the contrary, these demonic energies are really the same as those which activate and sustain the universe. They may contaminate and defile, but without them there can be no active life in the cosmos, no procreation or generation, no dharmic equilibrium. The forces of chaos and impurity are indispensable to the cosmic order; they are the source of all life and generation, although there must be a never-ending struggle to channel and contain them.<sup>14</sup>

The 'demonic' goddess and the many other figures of demonic or destructive power who take part in this struggle are all divine beings; they all inhabit the same sacred domain, and they are all imbued with a

<sup>12</sup> Michael Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community in South India. Structure and Consensus* (Princeton, 1979), pp. 219–89; Lionel Caplan, 'The popular culture of evil in urban south India', pp. 110–27.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Balfour, *Cyclopaedia of India and of Eastern and Southern Asia* 2nd. edn (5 vols., Madras, 1871–3), V, p. S-33

<sup>14</sup> David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths. Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition* (Princeton, 1980), p. 105.

measure of power which is fundamentally the same for peys, pattavans and other 'demon' divinities as well as the goddess. The temple in which the deity resides should not be seen solely as a domain of purity and transcendence which exists in isolation from the dangers and pollution of the wider world. Because the temple is also a locus of power this ideal of purity must always be compromised. The worshipper may only make contact with the divine at the point where chaos and impurity break their bounds and breach the isolation of the transcendent pure deity.<sup>15</sup>

This is why the goddess's *sakti* is always seen in such ambivalent terms by her devotees. Her victory is always qualified, always temporary, and in order to gain even this partial victory over the demonic world the goddess must become as terrible as the enemy she fights: she too must become demonic. The Tamil *ammans* who figure most prominently in popular worship and who are most readily appealed to in time of calamity are not figures like the remote and ethereal Durga, but the village 'mother' goddesses (often personified as aspects of the all-conquering Kali-Chamundi) and the many goddesses like Muttumalaiamman of Korunganni or Draupadiamman of Viravanallur whose shrines came to function as major regional pilgrimage places.<sup>16</sup> These female divinities are figures of horror, hags wreathed in skulls, stalkers of cremation grounds, banshees with streaming hair who revel in sickness, gore and slaughter. A typical Tamil invocation proclaims,

Come, come in haste, O goddess, with thy locks bedraggled, thou who hast three eyes, whose skin is dark, whose clothes are stained with blood, who has rings in thy ears, who hast a thousand hands, and ridest upon a monster and wieldest in thy hands tridents, clubs, lances and shields.<sup>17</sup>

The south Indian goddess tradition is closely associated with the worship of the great pan-Indian 'high' god Siva.<sup>18</sup> But even at nominally Saivite shrines such as the famous Sri Minaksi Sundaresvarar temple in Madurai, the main focus of worship for many centuries has been the goddess, in this case Minaksi, divine consort of Siva-Sundaresvarar but a figure who has evolved into a powerful protector-patroness in her own

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 40–57.

<sup>16</sup> Marie-Louise Reiniche, *Les Dieux et les hommes. Etudes des cultes d'un village du Tirunelveli Inde du Sud* (Paris, 1976), pp. 147–84; Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism' p. 397; Pate, *Tinnevelly*, p. 111; Dumont, *Une Sous-Caste*, pp. 383–96; Brenda E.F. Beck, 'The goddess and the demon. A local south Indian festival and its wider context', in Madeleine Biardeau, ed., *Autour de la Déesse Hindou* (Paris, 1981), pp. 83–136.

<sup>17</sup> Pate, *Tinnevelly*, p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> The fearsome Kali-Chamundi is the creation of the demonslaying Durga and has no need of a male counterpart.

right. The centrality of the south Indian goddess tradition has been explained in terms of the distinctive structure of the Dravidian kinship system. The woman is the lynchpin of this system, the figure who continually renews the connections between interlinked patrilineages. Therefore it is these bonds which are celebrated in the most important of the Madurai temple's annual festivals, the Cittrai *utsavam*.<sup>19</sup> Like many of the south's other great goddess festivals this is a rite of divine marriage. Popular tradition portrays Minaksi as the sister of Vishnu (the other principal pan-Indian 'high' god) and the bride of Siva-Sundaresvarar: this recreates the key Dravidian kinship triangle of brother-sister-groom and focuses on the figure of Minaksi as the bride who brings about a cosmic union of the two great divine lineages.<sup>20</sup>

This focus on divinities of blood and terror is clearly an ancient feature of south Indian religion, both in the wet zones and in the plains and upland country. But while forms of the 'demonic' or sakti deities have been universally venerated in these areas, the religious systems of south India were continually reconstituting themselves, continually throwing up new forms of worship, new configurations of local and supra-local cult activity. At the same time there was nothing random about this process: although these shifts and changes were often violent and contentious, it is still possible to trace specific historical trends and patterns in south Indian religious life.

One of the most widely documented of these developments is the dramatic expansion of south Indian goddess worship, a trend which began in the fourteenth century and continued right through the later pre-colonial period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was closely related to the movement of new migrant warrior groups into Tamilnad and the Malabar coast, and to the growing power of martial ruling groups in both wet and dry south India. Nayaka and poligar temple-building tended towards the selection of ammans as the chief deities of new or newly patronised cult centres. Female tutelaries – patroness figures associated with a particular locality (*grama-tēvatas*) or lineage (*kulatēvatas*) – were built up in power and status, and as a result they came to be closely identified with the elevated consort figures of the great rice-belt temples. This was not 'Sanskritisation', a term which has been used to describe a shift towards uniformly 'orthodox' and Brahmanical forms of Hindu worship. Here the dominant model came from the world of the warrior and the segmentary clan-based forest and plains dweller. Whatever their origins, whether they were 'pure'

<sup>19</sup> Dennis Hudson, 'Siva, Minaksi Visnu – reflections on a popular myth in Madurai', *IESHR*, 14:1 (1977), pp. 107–18.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

goddesses like Minaksi or fierce blood-drinking clan and place ammans like Mariamman and Bhagavati, all goddesses came to receive similar forms of worship, all were linked through their endowment of awesome life-giving sakti.<sup>21</sup>

### The warrior gods

The second group of beings who belong to this category of blood and power divinities are the masculine figures such as Muni (Munisveran or Munaiyar), Lord Aiyanar the warrior horseman, Karuppan the club-bearing hero and Madan or Sudalaimadan who is often visualised as a pig-faced giant or a mustachioed sword-waving military man. These divinities also play a part in the destruction of 'demonic' enemies, and like the goddess they too are perceived as divinities who may play an active role in human affairs.

Many of the male power divinities have come to be worshipped as associates, that is as sons, brothers or activated manifestations of south India's abstract 'high' gods, especially in the Malabar region where this process of assimilation has often gone farther than in many parts of the 'dry south'. It is to this region that devotees undertake the rigorous Sabarimalai pilgrimage to the Keralan hill shrine of the divine warrior prince Ayyappan (or Dharma Sasta, 'Lord of the Verities') a recently popularised Keralan divinity who is revered as a composite of the martial Aiyanar and the 'pure' all-India divinity Hariharaputra (the united form of the all-India high gods Siva and Vishnu).<sup>22</sup>

These male beings have come to be worshipped across much of the south as territorial boundary guardians, but their cults probably originated with the martial predator groups whose traditions of raiding and pastoralism gave way only very gradually to a settled village-based agrarian lifestyle. The shrines of these gods were often built around trees hung with spears, swords, chains and other warlike implements. Many contain groupings of small conical stones (pudams) rather than

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*; C.J. Fuller, *Servants of the Goddess. The Priests of a South Indian Temple* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 6–10; Burton Stein 'Devi shrines and folk Hinduism in medieval Tamilnad', in Edwin Gerow and Margery O. Lang, eds., *Studies in the Language and Culture of South Asia* (Seattle and London, 1973), pp. 75–90; Stein, 'Temples in Tamil country, 1300–1750 AD', *IESHR* 14:1 (1977), pp. 11–45; A. Hildebrandt, 'Sexuality and sacrifice: convergent subcurrents in the firewalking cult of Draupadi', in F.W. Clothey, ed., *Images of Man: Religion and Historical Process in South Asia* (Madras, 1982), pp. 72–111.

<sup>22</sup> K.R. Vaidyanathan, *Pilgrimage to Sabari*, (Bombay, 1978); E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs. Being a Person the Tamil Way* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 246–78; F.W. Clothey, 'Sasta-Aiyanar-Aiyappan: the god as a prism of social history', in Clothey, ed., *Images of Man: Religion and Historical Process in South Asia* (Madras, 1982), pp. 34–71.

anthropomorphic images, but there are also sites featuring brilliantly coloured clay heads painted with the hero-god's mustachioed features.<sup>23</sup> The British surveyor Thomas Turnbull observed a typical site of this kind in the early 1820s: it was in 'a very pretty and populous village' in a Marava-dominated tract north of Tirunelveli, and he noted the presence of 'a gigantic figure of Potter's ware, to whom offerings and sacrifices are made, of Cocks, by the Suders' [Maravas and other 'clean' non-Brahman caste groups]. Many of the region's other male power-divinity shrines feature the clusters of giant terracotta horses which are one of the most dramatic sights of the south Indian countryside: these are the steeds on which both Aiyanar and the Munis ride out on nightly forays of conquest.<sup>24</sup>

The power of the serpent has also been very widely recognised in south India, especially on the Malabar coast. Throughout the region Vaishnavite iconography gives an important place to the divine cobra Sesha who shelters the sleeping Vishnu beneath his outstretched hood. In the domain of everyday worship there are the ubiquitous *nāgas*, protective earth spirits who also take the form of serpents. Their shrines, which are associated with the forces of fertility and generation, feature clusters of stones carved with intertwined snake images: these are located at the base of large trees. Such figures have come to be closely linked to the world of the great temples and 'high' universal deities: like the cults of the village power deities this was far from being a tradition which was confined to a separate level of low-caste 'folk' worship. Stone naga clusters have long been a feature of major Siva and Vishnu temples in Kerala and Tamilnad, and the veneration of *nagas* was particularly important amongst the Nayers and Brahmans of Kerala. Some Keralan temples had *nagas* as presiding or subsidiary deities and *kavus* (sacred serpent groves) have been one of the distinctive features of Keralan domestic worship since ancient times.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from the two main groups of male and female power divinities, there are also many lesser 'demonic' beings including the army of invisible supernatural warriors (*vīrans*: a term denoting power and heroic

<sup>23</sup> V. Venkatasubba Aiyar, 'Alagarkoyil and its inscriptions', *QJMS* (n.s.) 27 (1936-7), pp. 122-35; Dumont, *Une Sous-Caste*, pp. 357-66, 396-403.

<sup>24</sup> Turnbull, 'Mémorial', pp. 32-3. See also Balfour, *Cyclopaedia*, V. pp. S-33, S-37; F.J. Richards, 'Notes on Muni worship', *QJMS* 5:1 (1914), pp. 53-5; Francis Buchanan, *A Journey From Madras Through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar* (3 vols., London, 1807), II, pp. 272-3; Dumont, *Une Sous-Caste*, pp. 396-403; Louis Dumont, 'A structural definition of a folk deity of Tamil Nad' in Dumont, ed., *Religion Politics and History in India. Collected Papers in Indian Sociology* (Paris, The Hague; 1970), pp. 20-32.

<sup>25</sup> Bernier, *Temple Arts*, p. 9-10; Paremeswaram Pillai, *Temple Culture*, p. 147.

valour) who attend figures like Aiyandar and Munisveran, and the violent and destructive spirits known as *pēy-picācus* who feed on human blood and on the violent passions of their living victims. David Mosse has shown that these deities are often understood to have been human in origin, men and women who have met a violent end or have otherwise died an abrupt or premature death, a 'bad' death which cuts off the victim before he or she has had the chance of duly surrendering all earthly ties.<sup>26</sup> Such beings were often referred to as *pāttavans* (from Tam. *pāttu*, cut). Their importance was well known to the early colonial ethnographers; Edward Balfour describes the typical viran or pattavan as an individual who had died a 'sudden, untimely or violent death, especially if in his lifetime he had been remarkable for crimes or a violent temper'. In such a case the person's spirit 'is supposed to haunt the place where his body lies, or wanders to and fro in the neighbourhood, as a newly born demon, an aerification and amplification of the bad features of the deceased persons [*sic*] character...'<sup>27</sup> Most divinities of this sort are associated with acts of lust and impurity – a woman who is 'outraged' by a Muslim soldier and then takes her own life, a Paraiyan who disguises himself as a clean-caste (sat-sudra) devotee in order to gain the office of manager (peishkar) of one of the great amman temples in Pudukkottai. (The Paraiyan is murdered with his *dēvadāsi* [temple-prostitute] concubine when the temple authorities discover his untouchability.)<sup>28</sup>

All these acts – rape, murder, illicit carnality, defilement of temples – reverse what in Brahmanical terms would be thought of as the dharmic order. This means that they are acts which bring about an outpouring of dangerous passions. At the same time though they also generate power, *sakti*, and so they are inseparably linked to the world of the healing and afflicting divinities. The female suicide comes to be worshipped as the goddess of a temple at Kovilpatti on the outskirts of Pudukkottai town; the Paraiyan and his lover become the objects of cult worship among many specialist artisan groups in the same area.<sup>29</sup>

Women who die by *satī* (self-immolation on their husbands' funeral pyres) also came to be worshipped as power divinities in many parts of south India. Few *pēy* spirits had temples of their own, but like the more

<sup>26</sup> Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', pp. 414–15.

<sup>27</sup> Balfour, *Cyclopaedia*, II, p. H-549.

<sup>28</sup> Such tales are still widely known in the south. And see e.g. K.R. Venkatarama Ayyar, *A Manual of the Pudukkottai State* (3 vols., Pudukkottai, 1938–44), II, Pt 2, p. 980.

<sup>29</sup> Venkat Rao, *A Manual of the Pudukkottai State*, (Pudukkottai, 1921), pp. 162, 457, 478. Such beings have the power to possess the living; transition to pattavan status may be proved if the deceased comes to possess someone in the waiting crowd of worshippers. See H. Krishna Sastri, *South Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses* (Madras, 1916), p. 234; Turnbull, 'Memoir', p. 9.

celebrated pattavan figures, famous satis were re-identified as cult deities with their own fully fledged shrines and temples. Like the proliferation of goddess cults in south India, the spread of this tradition was associated with the enhanced power of local predator groups and with the immigration of 'Vaduga' warrior cultivators from Andhra and the Deccan. A typical example is the shrine known as the Vadugachaikovil near the hill fort site of Tirumayyam which once divided the home territories of the Ramnad Marava chieftdom and the Pudukkottai Kallars: as the name suggests, the temple or *kōvil* on this spot is devoted to a Vaduga woman who was deified after committing sati.<sup>30</sup>

There are also cases of foreigners who enter this pantheon of deified human power figures. Soldiers made particularly suitable figures for this purpose; one of the most famous examples was an English officer who died in battle in 1809 when East India Company troops stormed the Travancore lines (the elaborate fortification system built by the eighteenth-century Malabar ruler Martanda Varma.) The officer's grave site became known as a powerful holy place. As for any other power divinity, it was necessary to offer him substances which were suitable for his fiery tastes and appetites, and since he was a firangi ('Frank', European) a consumer of alcohol and tobacco, it was thought proper to make him offerings of brandy and 'Trichinopoly' cheroots. As the next five chapters will show, the pantheon of warrior divinities was a particularly fertile seed-bed for the reception of Muslim devotional traditions.

### **The generation of a 'sacred landscape'**

Eighteenth-century south India then was still a land in which established 'peasant' communities overlapped and interacted – often explosively – with groups who were only just beginning to adopt a sedentary agrarian lifestyle. All the same, wherever settled villages were established, whether in the old river valley population centres or in the newly cultivated plains and forest uplands, the agrarian locality – the Tamil *ūr* or Malayali *kara* – tended to evolve into a ritual community, that is a miniature ordered cosmos with its own gods, shrines and procession routes, and a set of recognised boundaries which were

<sup>30</sup> In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sati became widespread among the Kallar and Marava ruling lines; until recently royal sati sites were still important places of pilgrimage in the former warrior chiefdoms. Venkat Rao, *Manual of the Pudukkottai State*, pp. 162, 465, 516, 547; Turnbull, 'Memoir', p. 9; Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras*, p. 330.

preserved by fierce supernatural guardians such as Aiyanar and Karuppan.

Over the centuries most south Indian villages tended to build up a body of corporate ritual which linked the various kin and caste groups who had a stake in the locality's moral order. These were not fixed or harmonious ranking schemes. In much of the Tamil country they tended to form into hierarchical orders of precedence which were confirmed and recognised through the allocation of distinctive ceremonial status markers. These were known as 'honours' (*mariyātai*) and they usually took the form of entitlements to make specified sacred offerings during a locality's important religious festivals. The holders of these status markers might be the heads of a powerful lineage or, alternatively, the leader of an entire caste group or status category. There were also prestigious titles, garments and ceremonial regalia which could be used to mark out the holders of pre-eminent local honours. In every area such schemes of rank and privilege were open to continual challenge and negotiation. These relationships were affirmed or reordered at festival time by means of apparently trivial decisions about which local group might carry processional torches or wear red turbans in the deity's procession rite. This meant that a locality's corporate religious rites often could be transformed into arenas of violent conflict.<sup>31</sup>

For all its contentiousness, though, the bounded society of the village was still thought of as a domain of order and civilisation. It contained many dangers, but outside, beyond the locality's residential quarters and cultivated fields was a world of even more threatening forces. There were the burning grounds and burial places with their lurking ghosts and spirits, and beyond them the uncleared 'wastes'. This concept of the wilderness had great power in south India. Its forests and hill tracts sheltered real-life predators, unsettled warriors and marauders, invading armies, alien tribute-gatherers and would-be conquerors, and it was also identified as the supernatural 'outside', the source of powerful and often actively malevolent spirits and 'demonic' deities.<sup>32</sup>

At festival time, especially during the festivals of the pre-eminent

<sup>31</sup> Reiniche, *Les Dieux et les hommes*; Arjun Appadurai and Carol Appadurai Breckenridge, 'The south Indian temple: authority, honour and redistribution', *CIS* (n.s.) 10:2 1976, pp. 187–209. J.S.F. Mackenzie, 'Caste Insignia', *The Indian Antiquary* 4:48 (1875), pp. 344–6. See also Olivier Herrenschmidt, 'Le sacrifice du buffle en Andhra côtier', in Biarreau, ed., *La Déesse*, pp. 137–77.

<sup>32</sup> J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition. Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society* (Chicago and London, 1985), pp. 6, 118–27; Daniel, *Fluid Signs*, pp. 61–104; Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', pp. 471–2, 483–7; Reiniche, *Les Dieux et les hommes*, pp. 26–33; Brenda E.F. Beck, 'The symbolic merger of body, space, and cosmos in Hindu Tamil Nadu', *CIS* (n.s.) 10:2 (1976), pp. 213–43.

blood-taking amman (goddess) whose shrine stood at a central point in the locality's main residential quarter, the village identified itself as a self-contained ritual unit. Once the worshippers and their ritualists had begun the rites – often by setting up a *karagam*, the lime-topped clay pot in which the deity resided during the festival – no one was to enter or leave the village until all the rites had been safely concluded. These generally included processions with *tērs* and *capparams*, wheeled chariots and hand-held platforms on which the deities were brought out from their shrines and paraded through their worshippers' residential quarters. The arrangement of these procession routes often involved the most delicate calculations of corporate power and status within the overall scheme of caste honour and precedence. The locality's annual processional rites also provided an opportunity to create and affirm relationships of dependence and authority which ran parallel to these wider local 'honours' schemes. It was at festival time that groups such as the village barbers, washermen and scavengers were presented with cloths and money by the men of authority to whom they were bound in local networks of customary service and patronage (*jajmāni*).<sup>33</sup>

The divinities who were honoured and propitiated in these corporate rites were perceived both as dispellers of suffering and as figures of blood, terror and destruction. Their festivals often featured physical ordeals and rites of penance such as hook-swinging and fire-walking, through which the individual devotee could seek to make contact with the goddess's *sakti*.<sup>34</sup> Following on from the processional chariot rite were the festivals's all-important acts of corporate blood sacrifice. A single Keralan Bhagavati festival might feature the slaughter of dozens of chickens; mass killings of sheep and goats were common at Tamil amman festivals, and some festivals featured the beheading of a sacrificial buffalo whose severed head would be placed before the deity's shrine with its foreleg in its jaws, its severed fragments handed round amongst all those who could claim membership in the locality's constituency of co-sharing worshippers.

These supposedly 'wild and orgiastic' ceremonies are described in any number of sensational colonial travel books and missionary tracts. Bishop Henry Whitehead of Madras produced a characteristically lurid account

<sup>33</sup> V.N. Narasinga Rao, 'The village deities in Vellore Taluk, North Arcot district', *QJMS* 10:2 (Jan. 1920), pp. 109–120; Henry Whitehead, *Village Gods of South India*, 2nd edn (Calcutta, 1921), pp. 100–8.

<sup>34</sup> The power invoked by the fire-walking ritual protected the people, crops and cattle of the whole locality. At a Madras Draupadiamman festival in 1901, ashes from the fire-pit were taken home and kept to drive away 'devils and demons'. In this case the colonial world was beginning to leave its mark: the successful fire-walkers were regaled with a cricket match. Edgar Thurston, *Ethnographic Notes in Southern India* (Madras, 1907), pp. 471–4.

of the region's goddess festivals:

Buffaloes are offered in some villages of the Tanjore district both to Kalamman and Pidari. Where the sacrifice is strictly performed, as at Vallum, the pujari, who is a Sudra, lives only on milk and fruit, and eats only once a day for a whole month beforehand, and on the day of the sacrifice puts the kapu [a protective cord dyed with turmeric] on his right wrist before he takes hold of the sacred sword. . . . He cuts off the head sometimes in one blow, and sometimes in two or three. . . . The dung of the victim is mixed with water, and poured over the image of the deity. In some villages. . . it is customary to take the entrails of the victim and hang them round the pujari's neck and put the liver in his mouth during the procession, when the rice and blood [the power-giving 'raktabali' substance] is sprinkled through the village.<sup>35</sup>

These rituals also emphasised the power of local magnates and village strongmen, as when the blood of the slaughtered animal was used to anoint the brow of the village headman or leader of the dominant local lineage.<sup>36</sup> They also had the aim of warding off disease and other afflictions. During visitations of cholera and smallpox pots of rice soaked with blood and entrails from the amman's buffalo sacrifice might be carried to the village boundaries, thus removing the illness from the village precincts; at the same time the goddess's karagam would be anointed with sandalwood paste and other sacred healing substances.<sup>37</sup>

Given the awesome forces which were being invoked and channelled on these occasions, it is not surprising that the festival was a time of special fear and tension, and this too was a perception which was mapped out in relation to the individual locality. There was often great anxiety about whether the goddess's daily ter (chariot) procession could make its full circuit of the village streets and residential quarters before nightfall. It is at night that mankind is most vulnerable to malevolent forces, and so while the festival was a time when the deity could be activated and made present among her worshippers, this state could not be prolonged. The goddess is safest when confined to her own precincts, and the village is a place of great danger until she has left the world of human worshippers and returned to her own domain in the temple.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Whitehead, *Ethnographic Notes*, p. 108. See also Buchanan, *Journey from Madras*, II, p. 410 and Beck, 'The goddess and the demon'. In 1853 the Madras Government commissioned a report on ordeals performed at such rites. See *Selections from the Records of the Madras Government*, no. VII. *Reports on the Swinging Festival and the Ceremony of Walking through Fire* (Madras, 1854) TNA.

<sup>36</sup> Balfour, *Cyclopaedia*, V, p. S-28-33.

<sup>37</sup> Hildebeitel, 'Sexuality and sacrifice'.

<sup>38</sup> Narasinga Rao, 'Village deities'; Beck, 'The goddess and the demon', p. 126. The *jatira* (goddess festival) is also a dangerous time because violent peys and pattavans may be attracted to the site during the rituals. Such a being may dwell in a tree 'from which he snuffs the odour of the sacrificial blood and descends unseen to join in the feast'. Balfour, *Cyclopaedia*, II, p. H-548.

Yet the worship of these blood and power divinities was part of a tradition which reached far outside the individual locality. Rather than focusing only on the worshipper's home terrain, there were some rites which stressed the broad reach of the affliction-giver and the need to build up a system of inter-village propitiation to control and channel the deity's *sakti*. During epidemics village washermen danced through their villages with the goddess's *karagams* on their heads; sheep were sacrificed, each locality's holy places were anointed with the sheep's blood, and the *karagams* were carried to the village boundaries and passed on to worshippers from nearby localities. The rites would then be repeated, each group striving to remove the affliction wrought by the goddess by transferring it ever onwards from locality to locality.<sup>39</sup>

These dancing washermen (members of the Vannan caste category in Tamilnad) were among the many village service people whose inherited occupational specialisations involved the right and the obligation to act as ritualists in local festivals and domestic life-crisis rituals. These groups were noted for their command of the dark and potentially destructive forces which were released into man's everyday world by the power divinities. They included the groups of specialist potters (Velars, Mal. Kusavans) who constructed Lord Aiyanar's terracotta horses and were also known for their repertoire of healing skills. (As chapter 3 will show, disease and the power of the supernatural were closely connected in south Indian society.) The Tamil and Malayali barbers (Ambattans) play a key role in the removal of human by-products such as hair and nail clippings; these are substances which defile and contaminate according to Brahmanical conventions of bodily purity. Village barbers are also involved in the rituals surrounding birth, death and other 'life crises'. Dependent labouring groups like the Malabar Cherumas and Tamil Paraiyans (a title which is supposed to derive from Tam. *parai*: drum) have had the task of removing animal corpses from the village precincts; they also perform the ritual drumming which is associated with possession rituals and trance dancing at south Indian goddess festivals.<sup>40</sup>

The complement of village ritualists also included pujaris (*pūcaris*) who carried out rituals on behalf of blood-taking power divinities, and *paṇṭārams* (non-Brahman priests, including members of the prestigious

<sup>39</sup> Narasinga Rao, 'Village deities', p. 119.

<sup>40</sup> Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (7 vols., Madras, 1909), I, pp. 32–45; II, pp. 45–91; IV, pp. 188–97; VI, pp. 77–139; Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community*, pp. 85–131; William Logan, *Malabar* (2 vols., Madras, 1951: 1st pub. 1887), I, p. 147; Dumont, *Une Sous-Caste*, pp. 35–8; Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', pp. 145; 147–8; D.B. McGilvray, 'Sexual power and fertility in Sri Lanka: Batticaloa Tamils and Moors', pp. 35, 50, 60, in C.P. MacCormack, ed., *Ethnography of Fertility and Birth* (London, 1982), pp. 25–73.

Vellala caste category) who served at the temples of many vegetarian deities (and, in some cases, at those of the region's blood-taking gods and goddesses.) Many (though not all) localities might house populations of Brahman priests (Skt. *purohīts*) who were called in by at least some members of the community to perform the *homam* fire sacrifice and the 'Sanskritic' purification rites which accompanied births, marriages and other important life-cycle events. Worship (*puja*, Tam. *pūcai*) offered at the temples of the vegetarian 'high' gods is performed by Brahman ritualists with the participation of officiants from some of the higher-ranking vegetarian Vellala sub-divisions.<sup>41</sup>

Although much of the worship of ammans and other 'demonic' deities took place at the level of the individual locality, it would be wrong to describe all the gods and goddesses of this tradition as 'village' deities. Migrating warriors, cultivators and artisans carried their power divinities with them into new regions, and this helped to build up complex networks of inter-regional devotion and pilgrimage in south India. Often a particular deity would be taken up by a local notable and have a great new temple built in his honour: such a deity might acquire a large and wide-ranging constituency of worshippers extending far beyond the limits of any one locality. Furthermore, while some shrines housed divinities who received worship from entire localities, many villages also contained the shrines of kulatevam or kin group tutelaries whose worship usually transcended the boundaries of the individual village.<sup>42</sup>

These cross-cutting kinship ties provided one of the powerful linking forces in south Indian society. For most caste groups in Tamilnad the smallest units of kinship organisation were households (*kuḍumbams*); these linked up into patrilineages (*pangali*) which formed in turn into endogamous clan groups (*kulams*). The kulam is usually identified as the basic social unit of Tamil society: unlike north India the south has built up a system of cross-cousin marriage which continually reinforces the affinity of patrilineage groups. (The woman's ideal marriage partner is her mother's brother or mother's brother's son; the expectation is that her husband's family will return a bride in the next generation). In some cases, as in the Konku region described by Brenda Beck, these units were

<sup>41</sup> One linking feature in Tamil and Malayali religion is a belief in the power of sacred texts, especially the Vedas and the works of the bhakti hymnodists. (See C. J. Fuller 'The attempted reform of south Indian temple Hinduism' in J. Davis, ed., *Religious Organisation and Religious Experience* (London, 1982), pp. 153-67.) Even so the use of such texts did not set a norm of scriptural 'orthodoxy' for the whole society.

<sup>42</sup> The so-called village goddess is often perceived as a dominion-building conqueror who originated somewhere outside the locality in which her cult has been established. Many amman festivals start with an invocation at a spot marking the direction from which the goddess first arrived in the village. Narasinga Rao, 'Village deities', p. 111.

all territorially defined; each of them – household, patrilineage and clan – had its own *kulatevam*, usually a goddess who protected the ancestral domain and whose shrine would be a place of power and pilgrimage for the group even if its members had migrated far outside its original homeland.<sup>43</sup>

All this meant that a given locality would contain a wide range of shrines, temples and sacred sites. Apart from the many different sorts of Christian and Muslim holy places which will be described later on, there would be shrines of household, lineage and clan group tutelaries, temples of various cult deities within the village, shrines to divinities whose rituals are a focus for most or all of the village population, and shrines of gods and goddesses functioning as cult or tutelary figures for people living at a great distance from the village site.<sup>44</sup>

### **'High' and 'low' Hinduism: virtuosity and accommodation**

How did the religion of goddesses and demons relate to what has traditionally been regarded as the dominant 'high' Hindu or Brahmanical religion of south India? As a system of belief which focuses on Brahmanical concepts of purity and pollution and on the scripturally based vegetarian worship of the anthropomorphic 'high' gods, most of the religious traditions which we now call Hindu are comparatively modern creations. Indeed much that has come to be regarded as part of 'traditional' south Asian Hinduism was actually the product of textual codifications carried out by European orientalist of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, and of the campaigns of religious reform and 'revival' which were inspired and patronised by the British colonial authorities.<sup>45</sup>

At the beginning of the eighteenth-century most of the population of the Tamil dry zones regarded the fierce *amman*s, *peys*, *pattavans* and male divinities as beings who embodied divine force at its most active and dangerous. For these worshippers there were few hard and fast boundaries between the blood-taking 'demonic' beings and the remote

<sup>43</sup> Brenda E.F. Beck, *Peasant Society in Konku. A Study of Right and Left Subcastes in South India* (Vancouver, 1972), pp. 78–109. On Keralan kinship, see C.J. Fuller, *The Nayars Today* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 51–72.

<sup>44</sup> Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community*, pp. 219–90; Beck, *Peasant Society*, pp. 78–109; Reiniche, *Les Dieux et les hommes*; Fuller, *The Nayars Today*, p. 54.

<sup>45</sup> As the Vedas and other classic scriptures were 'discovered' by western scholars, these texts were taken to be the 'real' basis of Hinduism, and all contemporary religious life was held to be a decline from this vedic golden age. See David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance. The Dynamics of Indian Modernization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), pp. 22–42.

'Sanskritic' gods and goddesses – Siva and Vishnu, and their consorts and associated regional divinities. Also, as we shall see, it was in the worship of the sakti deities and other activated power figures that south Indian Islam and Christianity became most powerfully involved with the cults and devotional traditions which are now described as 'Hindu'.<sup>46</sup>

Many of those who inhabited the Tamil and Keralan wet zones tended to focus rather more on the worship of the regional and all-India 'high' gods. This was largely a result of the spread of the powerful regional movements of theistic devotional worship or *bhakti* which directed the worshipper to a passionate, personalised love of an individual deity. The devotee's or *bhakta*'s adoration was often focused on the person of a human guru or spiritual preceptor who was revered as a living manifestation of the god. In south India the Tamil hymnodists of the third to seventeenth-century AD (Vaishnavite *Alvars* and Saivite *Nayanars*) who articulated these ideals, stressed the power and sanctity of individual holy places. This then inspired the growth of the great stone-built temple complexes which became such a conspicuous feature of the south Indian river valleys under the rule of the Cholas, Pandyas and Pallavas and their warrior successors.<sup>47</sup> At each of these shrines a specific personification of the god has been made present: Siva is worshipped as Mahadeva, Mahesvara and Esvara 'the Lord'; he is Sri Nataraja, 'Lord of the Dance' at Chidambaram, and Sri Sthanunathaswami, 'the immovable' or lord of ascetics at Suchindram. Vishnu is Sri Venkatesvara, 'Lord of the Seven Hills' at Tirupati and Sri Ranganathaswami, 'Lord of the Holy Island' at Srirangam. On the Malabar coast he is Sri Parasurama, Lord Rama the axe-thrower, and at Kerala's most popular centre of pilgrimage he is the divine lover Krishna as lord (or *appan*) of Guruvayur.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> South Indians recognise the concept of an abstract, unembodied God (*katuval* or *tevam*) but this has not been the form in which most worshippers make contact with the divine. As an embodied force, sacred energy has been personified in the shape of many beings, both male and female.

<sup>47</sup> From the fourteenth-century, shrines such as Kanchi, Srirangam, Tirupati and Tiruvella became the headquarters of great regional guru networks. These sectarian temples built up formal doctrinal links with lesser Saivite and Vaishnavite centres; their Brahmans carried out rituals prescribed by the Sanskrit *āgama* and *samhita* texts. See Fuller, 'Reform of temple Hinduism'; Arjun Appadurai, 'Kings, sects and temples in south India, 1350–1700 AD', *IESHR* 14:1 (1977), pp. 44–73; Stein, 'Temples in Tamil country'; K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *Development of Religion in South India* (Madras, 1963), 49–70, 79–135. On gurus in the south see Buchanan, *Journey from Madras*, I, pp. 21–3, 145–7, 256–7; II, pp. 261, 331, 410, and compare Frank F. Conlon, *A Caste in a Changing World. The Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins 1700–1935* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1977), pp. 9–13, 19–22.

<sup>48</sup> The worship of the two 'high' gods has generally been complementary; both have acquired individualised local embodiments. (Fuller, *Servants of the Goddess*, pp. 6–7.) At some temples this complementarity is expressed in terms of the central relationships of the south Indian kinship system. See Dennis Hudson, 'Siva, Minaksi, Visnu'.

Any one of these gods in his temple is perceived as a king in majesty, and his worshippers are the subjects of a divine realm which he commands from within his terrestrial seat of power. At the spectacular periodic *utsavams* or processional festivals which have been celebrated for many centuries at all the great shrines, a movable image of the god is mounted on a great *ter*, a wheeled wooden chariot, and processed amongst the adoring populace. Since they too provided an arena in which worshippers reconstituted local schemes of ceremonial precedence, the great temples' *utsavam* rites were often as contentious as those of any village goddess festival.<sup>49</sup>

Although these deities were best known in the river valley areas near the major Saivite and Vaishnavite shrines, many Tamil and Malayali villages contained smaller scale temples to the vegetarian gods, and the cultivating and artisan groups who inhabited these localities tended to take some part in their worship. Such worshippers knew Lord Siva in his manifestations as cosmic dancer, as forest ascetic wanderer, and as the divine renouncer leading mankind to salvation. Most were also familiar with the benign and much-loved figure of the god's companion or 'vehicle', the sacred bull Nandi whose stone image stands within the precincts of every south Indian Siva temple.<sup>50</sup> Vishnu has been widely known as the resplendent and all-pervading god-king, sustainer and preserver of *dharma*, universal order. He has also been portrayed as a divine sleeper at rest on the cosmic ocean; this watery void is the state of formlessness from which the universe emerges at the start of its eternal cycles of cosmic renewal and destruction. There are also the twelve incarnations of Vishnu including the fearful man-lion Ugranarasimha, Krishna the child-god and idealised lover and Rama the warrior hero who leads an army of monkeys recruited by his faithful monkey-general Hanuman: Hanuman too is a popular figure in south Indian temple iconography.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Appadurai and Breckenridge, 'The south Indian temple'. The colonial records contain many reports of unrest and violence at *utsavam* festivals. Riots and litigation arising from 'honours disputes' at temples such as Kanchi (1792–1808) and Tiruvellur in Tanjore (1819) are described in BOR vol. 59/18 June 1792/15–16/pp. 2629–43/TNA; BOR vol. 478/14 Nov. 1808/32/pp. 10211–221/TNA; BOR vol. 820/12 April 1819/46–7/pp. 2956–62/TNA. The great wealth of these institutions generated fierce conflicts amongst temple managers and shareholders. As of 1818 the great Vaishnavite temple at Srirangam was one of the richest temples in south India. It supported nearly 1,000 ritualists and other temple servants including eighty dancing girls and one 'Feeder of the [sacred] parrots'. On conflicts over control of temple resources see BOR vol. 796/44/29 June 1818/pp. 7444–512/TNA.

<sup>50</sup> The elephant headed divinity Ganesh or Pillaiyar, remover of obstacles and begetter of auspicious beginnings, is another of Siva's associates.

<sup>51</sup> Vishnu's consort is Parvati; the god is often depicted with his 'vehicle' the divine eagle Garuda.

These divinities never receive any of the sacrificial blood offerings which please the male and female power divinities and help to channel and contain their sakti. But as Bhairava the forest wanderer the figure of Siva is closely connected to the world of the warrior predators who dwell outside the boundaries of the settled agrarian order. In this form Siva appears as a terrifying figure with bulging eyes, matted hair and a necklace of skulls; he is a male counterpart to the fearful skeletal sakti goddess Chamundi, and an idealised form of the guru or human preceptor who strikes out into the wilderness in order to acquire the esoteric knowledge which will lead mankind to salvation.<sup>52</sup> There has also been a close relationship between the worship of Vishnu and the cults of south India's blood-taking warrior divinities. At major temples such as the Madurai Minaksi shrine, these links have often been forged through the creation of elaborate annual festivals which enact the marriage of the goddess and her consort. Rituals of this kind have allowed the gods of powerful warrior groups to attain some form of recognised standing within the precincts of the vegetarian 'high' god, even though the martial predators and their gods were perceived as coming from a world of danger and potential defilement according to the teachings of 'orthodox' or 'Sanskritic' Hinduism. As subsequent chapters will show, this was a form of alliance-building which had much in common with the construction of new alliances and kinship ties between aspiring chiefs and rajas and their warrior 'feudatories'.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict*, p. 126. Siva has been described as 'the most ancient and entrenched of universal deities' in the Tamil country, and his worship is a major force in Keralan worship. Fuller, *Servants of the Goddess*, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> As Dennis Hudson has shown ('Siva, Minaksi, Visnu') this festival enacts Vishnu's journey to the wedding of his sister Minaksi. Vishnu is manifested here as Alagar the Beautiful, lord of an ancient temple in the hill country near Madurai. This was the territory of one of the martial Kallar groups who were overrun by the nayakas and then recruited into their military alliance systems. As their chief tutelary deity (kuladevata) this group came to venerate the divine club-bearing warrior Karuppan, and by the seventeenth-century their most important holy place was a Karuppan shrine situated outside the main gate of the Kidaripatti Alagar temple. (See Baliga, *Madurai*, pp. 406–7.) Hudson says that the seventeenth-century Madurai ruler Tirumalai Nayaka may have elevated Karuppan to this position as honoured retainer of Alagar. This ruler was responsible for building up the Madurai goddess's great Cittrai festival, and for rescheduling Alagar's procession to Madurai to coincide with the Madurai Cittrai festival. By pulling the Kallars' warrior clan god into the web of ritual stretching out from his capital, Tirumalai Nayaka was seeking to secure his links with this key group of martial 'feudatories'. Karuppan was made a co-sharer in Alagar's realm, and the Kallars were made co-sharers in the nayaka's realm. This did not involve the imposition of a pure 'Sanskritic' identity on the Kallars' kuladevata. Instead, during the festival Alagar–Vishnu is re-identified as a blood-taking power deity, and as a Kallar: his image is equipped with a Kallar's club and boomerang and attended by a retinue of Kallars. (See Venkata Subba Aiyar, 'Alagarkoyil and its inscriptions', pp. 122–35.) Alagar always fails to complete the journey; the marriage occurs before the god arrives,

As in the case of the Siva and Vishnu temples of Tamilnad and Kerala, vegetarian forms of worship have predominated at the shrines of south India's most powerful regional god, Murukan the lance-bearing warrior huntsman (also known as Subrahmanya or Skanda, and often depicted as a six-headed human figure riding a peacock). He too is often described as a 'pure' or 'Sanskritic' high god, but he is a less remote and impersonal figure than Siva and Vishnu and their consorts. By the eleventh-century AD Lord Murukan had become one of the most widely venerated cult gods in south India, and his shrines – especially his shore temple at Tiruccentur and his hinterland hill shrines at Palni and Tirupparankunram – are still among the most popular places of pilgrimage in south India. He has come to be widely portrayed as the son or brother of Siva, but his cult myths and temple traditions (*stalapurana* texts) still recall his origins as a tutelary of the region's early indigenous hunting and pastoralist groups. In more recent times the Murukan cult has continued to bridge the gap between the world of the unsettled military man and forest tribal and the settled agrarian world of the great temples and old royal court centres.<sup>54</sup>

### The eighteenth century: new temples and new corporate divinities

By the beginning of the eighteenth century the most conspicuous developments in south Indian religious life were the accelerated growth of the major temples and pilgrimage places, and the creation of elaborate new rituals which dramatised the rank and power of the region's warrior rulers. Kanchi, Srirangam, and Chidambaram in Tamilnad, and Tiruvella and Suchindram on the Malabar coast were now among the richest and most influential of the large-scale sectarian shrines, but it was the great Vaishnavite temple complex at Tirupati which underwent a particularly dramatic transformation under the rule of these expanding dynasts. One of the reasons for this was the need which these rulers had to maintain ties to the artisans and trading people who had begun to play such a crucial role in the commercialisation of their realms. Incoming groups such as the

and, significantly, he goes off to bed a Muslim consort at another shrine. Thus the rite proclaims that the urban ruler cannot do without the services of these unsettled predator groups, but they are always to be kept at arm's length. So too for their gods: the power divinities are indispensable to the 'pure' high gods, but they come from a dangerous and alien domain which must always be controlled and kept at bay.

<sup>54</sup> F.W. Clothey, *The Many Faces of Murukan. The History and Meaning of a South Indian God* (The Hague, 1978). There is at least one popular Murukan shrine in Kerala; Murukan is a composite deity formed up out of an indigenous 'lord of the hunt, a mythic hunter-chieftain' joined to the Aryan or 'Sanskritic' warrior deity Skanda-Kumara. (*Ibid.*, pp. 129, 36–62.)

Patnulkaran silk weavers had brought with them a tradition of ardent Vaishnavite bhakti worship. This led to a massive inflow of resources to the south Indian Vishnu shrines, and particularly to Tirupati where the worship of Vishnu as Sri Venkatesvara, Lord of the Seven Hills, soon set a new standard of opulence and elaborate 'kingly' ceremonial.<sup>55</sup>

At the same time this focus on lavish temple-centred devotional worship certainly did not bring about a move away from the cults of the fierce south Indian gods and sakti divinities. It will be remembered that the proliferation of amman or goddess shrines was one of the distinguishing characteristics of nayaka rule, and their successors the poligars continued to construct and endow temples to the warrior gods and ammans whose powers were so closely associated with the strength and dynamism of their domains.

Nor were there clear boundaries between holy places which were sacred to the 'Sanskritic' gods and those which were commanded by blood-taking power divinities. Tirupati itself is an upland temple which was perceived as being situated on the margins of the settled agrarian world. The shrine's historical chronicle literature celebrates the feats of warrior chiefs and pastoralists from the rough upland hill country around the 'seven hills' site: these are the legendary devotees who came to be revered as the temple's original founders. In one of these texts the site of the temple is said to have been marked out when a Telugu-speaking Yanadi forest dweller tried to attack a wild white boar which then proclaimed its identity as the god Vishnu in his incarnation as the divine boar Varaha.<sup>56</sup>

This is one of a large number of south Indian temple legends or *stalapuranas* in which the god is said to have revealed himself after an act of aggressive impiety by a hunter or pastoralist, a man of low or ambiguous ritual status according to the criteria of Brahmanical caste ranking. As at many other south Indian holy places, Tirupati is a shrine at which the tension between pure and impure, settled and unsettled – and the uncertain borderline which divides the martial predator from the established founder of a Hindu kingdom – has been a central theme of the temple's myths and rituals. The main change that was taking place at this time was neither the suppression of one tradition in favour of another, nor an attempt to 'purify' or Brahmanise the worship of ammans and other

<sup>55</sup> E.P.N. Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History* (Kottayam, 1970), p. 335.

<sup>56</sup> The text cited here is 'The Stala Mahatyam or the legendary account of the Sree Venkat Eswar Swamy'. (Transcribed for the ethnographer Colin Mackenzie in 1804: Mackenzie Collection – General, vol. 16, pp. 490a-d, IOL.) It describes the Telugu-speaking Velama Naidu chief who founded the Kalahasti poligar domain: this ruler too is hailed as a founder of Tirupati; in the text the god orders him to build the first of the Tirupati hill shrines and initiate its utsavam festivals. The Yanadis were known to the early British ethnographers as 'primitive' jungle people from North Arcot and Nellore districts.

power deities. The two were coming to interact, however, though these relationships were often ambivalent and contentious. The goddess-centred marriage rituals involving divinities such as Alagar (Vishnu) and Karuppan the club bearer have already been mentioned. It was probably at about this time too that many sakti goddess shrines began to orientate themselves within a wider sacred network which had come to be defined as the domain or sacred kingdom of one of the 'high' regional gods. At a village near the nayaka fortress town of Vellore, for example, the *jatra* or goddess festival which honoured the fierce amman Gangamma came to have as its opening ritual an invocation in which the goddess was called to enter the village from her ancestral domain in the Tirupati hills; she was also hailed by her worshippers as the wife or consort of the 'pure' Sri Venkatachalapathi (one of the titles of Sri Venkatesvara) although the goddess herself was fed with a great profusion of slaughtered sheep and fowls.<sup>57</sup>

This point about the expansion of sacred devotional networks is related to a third key development in the region's religious life. In both Malabar and the Tamil country, many clan-based segmentary groups and semi-nomadic predators were beginning to acquire the characteristics which we now associate with 'traditional' south Asian caste identity. Such people did not necessarily adopt a Brahmanical model of purity and hierarchical precedence. Indeed one of the means by which they began to build up a sense of shared regional identity was through the corporate veneration of tutelary deities, usually one of the blood-taking power divinities or 'demonic' human characters (*pattavans*) who were revered as idealised representations of the group's heroic warrior lifestyle. As has already been seen, the worship of Karuppan provided this kind of focus for many sub-divisions of the Tamil Kallar, and many Marava groups tended to form into formal caste-like divisions around the figure of Madan or Sudalaimadan. Later chapters will show that Islam and Christianity in south India achieved their most lasting impact where heroic bearers of these new faiths acquired a social and ideological role which was similar to that of these emerging corporate deities.

This was a process which had been at work for a considerably longer period among the region's established wet and dry zone agrarian groups. Here too caste affiliation was still fairly open and amorphous and certainly did not operate as a closed and exclusive communal attachment. Even so groups such as the Tamil Pallis (dependent agrarian labourers, 'untouchables') had achieved some measure of broad regional affinity through the worship of the goddess Draupadiamman (or her male counterpart

<sup>57</sup> V.N. Narasinga Rao, 'Village deities', pp. 116-18.

Kuttandevan.) By the beginning of the eighteenth-century much of the region's immigrant population of Telugu-speaking Kammās had come to focus on the worship of the fierce amman Yellamma. The more specialised occupational groups tended to develop more tightly organised cult networks than any of these loosely structured agricultural populations: with their tradition of shared migration and interdependent commercial ties the Telugu speaking Komatis built up a particularly close-knit ritual tradition around the worship of the deified virgin goddess Kannika Pāremeswari.<sup>58</sup>

In Kerala the picture was rather more complicated. In the early 1800s the traveller Francis Buchanan was witness to the power of the region's fierce martial deities among the major agricultural groups, most notably the Ezhava or Tiyya coconut cultivators. Divinities such as the warrior amman Bhagavati played an important role as tutelaries to many sections of these broad caste categories, but this goddess's great cock-killing festivals also drew in many members of the region's arms-bearing Nayar élite as donors and co-sharers in the rite.<sup>59</sup> At the same time many Nayars were beginning to take part in the elaborate regional pilgrimage cycles which had acquired new importance through the support and patronage of the region's recently established warrior rulers. In the most general sense the tradition of pilgrimage and the veneration of famous all-India *tirthas* or holy places had long served as a point of cultural unification cutting across all the divisions and regional particularities of south Asian religious life. The growth of the Sabarimalai pilgrimage has already been mentioned, and the dissemination of the bhakti movement's vernacular devotional texts had familiarised many south Indians with the powers and merit-conferring capacities of other *tirthas* in both north and south India.

For every devotee there were innumerable possible variations as to the actual routes to be taken, the rites to be performed and the specific combination of holy places to be visited by the intending pilgrim. For bhakti-influenced groups all over India, and particularly for powerful military people like the Marathas, the newly prestigious pilgrimage to Kasi (Benares) had now become a favourite rallying point, a means of asserting élite power and status in relation to other groups in one's home territory. The Malabar Nayars are a case in point. As of the late eighteenth-century, the Nayars were still one of the loosest of south Indian status categories: virtually anyone, even non-Malayali military men, could be recruited into the armies of one of the region's new warrior *rajas* and endowed with Nayar titles and 'honours'. Because the category

<sup>58</sup> Baliga, *Madras District Gazetteers. Coimbatore* (Madras, 1966), p. 193; Buchanan, *Journey from Madras*, II, pp. 269, 272-3.

<sup>59</sup> Buchanan, *Journey from Madras*, II, pp. 415-16.

was so vague and amorphous the region contained a very wide range of agrarian and occupational specialist groups all claiming Nayar rank. By the end of the eighteenth century, though, some of these people had adopted particular schemes of pilgrimage as part of a move towards the definition of a more specific 'caste lifestyle' or defining identity for high-ranking Nayar warrior groups. Thus for the Nayars of southern Malabar Buchanan noted that the preferred route to Kasi took in Bodh Gaya in Bihar and the famous Jaganath shrine at Puri in Orissa, and then a series of south Indian holy places including Tirupati and Ramesvaram.<sup>60</sup>

### **The political context of worship: the 'little kingdom'**

In south India all holy places were perceived as repositories of power, and there was no clear distinction here between spiritual or sacred power and the power accruing to kings and would-be state builders. Peasant magnates and dry-zone warriors had come to express their new-found power through the endowment of temples and the acquisition of prestigious festival honours. In all the kingdoms and petty states of Malabar and the Tamil country, acts of piety such as the embellishment of shrines and the recruitment of client ritualists were as much a part of statecraft as the creation and financing of armies, the building of alliances and the formation of a revenue system.

Until well into the period of direct British rule, it was not Brahmans or 'Sanskritic' ritual but the growth of new warrior kingdoms which provided the main source of change in south Indian religious life. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the nayaka and poligar domains expand and commercialise; they also began to fuse warrior culture and religion with the temple-centred worship of the great wet-zone shrine centres. These developments were already underway in the period of Vijayanagar military overlordship which succeeded the rule of the Cholas, Pandyas and Pallavas; they continued under the Tamilnad nayakas who ruled from the fort towns of Tanjore, Trichy and Madurai in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and were then carried forward by the two groups of kingdoms which were established in the south following the decline of the nayakas. The first group of these post-nayaka domains were the kingdoms of the more fertile parts of south India including Travancore, Cochin and Maratha-ruled Tanjore. The second were the dry zone's poligar states (*pāḷaiyams*); by the middle of the eighteenth century the largest and most powerful of these were the

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 410–11; L.K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, *The Cochin Tribes and Castes* (2 vols., Madras, 1912), II, p. 18.

'kingly' domains of Pudukkottai, Ramnad, Udaiyarpalaiyam, Sivagangai and Ettaiyapuram. There were also hundreds of lesser poligar domains, many of which, like the bleak little Marava palaiyam of Nattuvakuricci in northern Tirunelveli, claimed tribute from just a handful of barren villages. By the middle of the eighteenth century the 'wild' Kallar and 'barbarous' Marava chiefs were said to control as many as seventy or eighty thousand warriors, and the 'Vaduga' poligars could probably muster about the same number of 'brave though undisciplined men'.<sup>61</sup>

What follows in this section is an account of the ideology and statecraft of the warrior-ruled 'little kingdom', a type of state which had its origins in the dry plains and forest fringe country, but which tended to spread into the rice-growing dynastic 'core' areas of Tamilnad and the Malabar coast. The 'little kingdoms' of Tamilnad have been examined in a number of recent studies. They have been analysed in terms of their 'segmentary' political structures;<sup>62</sup> in terms of the forms of production which underlay them;<sup>63</sup> and in terms of the practices of gifting and redistribution which tied local patrilineages and warrior underlings to their warrior rulers.<sup>64</sup> Here the emphasis will be on the chief or king as a warrior divinity incorporating lesser chiefs and village elders into the domain represented by his body, and exchanging honour and service with other divine beings. It is this which provided the critical link between the religion of the blood-taking power divinities and the traditions of worship which focused on the great regional centres of formal or 'high' Hindu culture. These notions of sovereignty and incorporation also provided the context

<sup>61</sup> R. Sathyanatha Aiyar, *History of the Nayaks of Madura* (Oxford, 1924); K. Rajayyan, *Rise and Fall of the Poligars of Tamilnadu* (Madras, 1974); Christopher Baker, 'Tamilnad estates in the twentieth-century', *IESHR* 13:1 (1976), pp. 1-44. A typical eighteenth-century poligar force (under the petty hill chief of Venkatagiri) consisted of 14,000 warriors armed with pikes, matchlocks and cannon. Mackenzie Collection - General, vol. 9, pp. 106-7. See Collec. to BOR 2 Jan. 1837, 27 June 1837/2, 89/pp. 1-6, 95-9/TCR vol. 7967/TNA. Some poligars' rights and titles were conferred by the nayakas as a reward for military service, but most carved out their own chiefdoms and were cajoled or forced into the nayakas' tribute systems. These ties were subject to continual shifts and conflicts. The greatest of the nayaka domains was established by the Vijayanagar 'viceroy' Visvanatha Nayaka (1529-64), a Telugu warrior who established his capital in the ancient Pandya temple town of Madurai. His Vellala *dalavay* (chief office-holder) Ariyanatha Mudaliar took power in the rich Tambraparni rice lands; together they are said to have commanded seventy-two dry-zone poligar chiefs. See William Fullarton, *A View of the English Interest in India* 2nd edn (London, 1788), pp. 87-94.

<sup>62</sup> Stein, *Peasant State*.

<sup>63</sup> D. A. Washbrook, *South India. The New Cambridge History of India*, II (Cambridge, forthcoming).

<sup>64</sup> Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown. Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1987). See also Ludden, *Peasant History*, pp. 26-41, 68-75.

within which the conversion religions of Islam and Christianity succeeded or failed in making their impact in south India.

The historical sources for this tradition of warrior ideology and statecraft are much fuller than those which reveal the nature of village-level faith and worship. Among the most useful of these are the poligar histories and historical chronicles which were collected at the beginning of the nineteenth-century by the pioneering orientalist Colin Mackenzie.<sup>65</sup> These accounts of the poligars and their origins are all soldier's tales. The poligar himself is portrayed as a predator, an upland pastoralist or peasant warrior turned state-builder. His realm is born out of war, conflict and blood-letting: most of the texts begin with a great feat of arms for which the chief or clan head receives marks of royal rank and honour from a much greater ruler, usually from one of the nayakas or from one of the fourteenth- or fifteenth-century warrior dynasts of Vijayanagar. (Most of the nayakas claimed power as the descendants of immigrant Vijayanagar 'viceroys' or as client chiefs who had been drawn into the Vijayanagar rulers' system of dispersed military overlordships.)

Following his incorporation by one of these greater men of power, the new lord is then shown turning his military skills against other unsettled predator groups. He moves into a tract of thinly populated 'fringe' country, wars down the groups he finds there, and then starts clearing and settling the land, building the characteristic fort-mart towns (*kōṭṭai-pēṭṭais*) of the poligar country, recruiting cultivators, merchants, artisans and priestly groups, and building up a clan levy army equipped with cannon, muskets, swords, bows, pikes and boomerangs.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Most of these texts and oral accounts were compiled by Brahman literati attached to the poligar courts. Using myth, legend and historical narrative, they show how these rulers and their chroniclers perceived their origins at a time when most of the region's 'little kings' were still involved in the ploys and stratagems of south Indian statecraft and were only just beginning to be drawn into the orbit of the colonial state. See Mackenzie Collection – General, IOL.

<sup>66</sup> A typical chronicle, the 'History of the family of the poligar of Paukal' [Pakala in North Arcot] says that by the early eighteenth century these warrior chiefs had 'cleared away the jungle' and founded a market, a Brahman settlement and fifteen villages. The first of these petty chiefs was a seventeenth-century Ekari or Yakarlu warrior who held kaval rights in the Chandragiri and Tirupati area: the kaval system gave military men the power to 'pacify' and take tribute from a given area. (Mackenzie Collection – General, vol. 9, p. 66.) Another poligar history, describing the origins of the poligars of 'Moogral', says that the first of these chiefs were Telugu Yakarlu warriors in service to a more powerful ruling lineage, the rajas of Chandragiri. By the middle of the sixteenth century the Moogral line had carved out a tiny domain in the dry upland area to the west of Tirupati. Two generations later they had acquired the resources to fortify one of these hill settlements: the text says that Tambi Naidu, the then head of the clan, 'called [this locality] Tomby Nairdu Poor [Tambi Naidu-pur] and assumed the Rank and mode of life of a Polygar'; *ibid.*, pp. 60–2. For eye-witness accounts of the poligar fortresses and their weaponry. See BOR vol. 3560: 9 Nov. 1801/pp. 298–302; 19 June 1801/pp.

This is actually quite close to the real process of domain-building which continued in south India throughout the whole of the eighteenth-century. Chiefdoms spawned more chiefdoms; each would-be ruler claimed legitimacy from a greater dynastic line and then went on to confer 'little kingship' on even smaller lords. A typical chain of validation is described in the chronicles of the Yakarlu (or Ekari) Naidu rajas of Moorgral, whose domain was built up around one of the many fortified hill sites in the dry upland country in which Tirupati is situated. In about 1720 the chief of this palaiyam is supposed to have given his endorsement to another Yakarlu warrior with a palaiyam at 'Tombah' (Tumpa). This newly established chieftain is shown doing what all other aspiring warlords were expected to do: he clears the jungle, builds a fort and founds a series of artisan and commercial settlements. The Moorgral poligar then 'gave him a Palinkeen (palanquin, the throne-like conveyance of gods and kings) [and] paid him the respects due to royalty': this meant that the new chieftain could claim to be a true little king.<sup>67</sup> It was also a transaction which conferred benefit on both patron and recipient. For the giver, in this case the raja of Moorgral, the presentation of the palanquin affirmed the ruler's power to act as a king-maker and alliance-builder. This too was an indispensable act for a true poligar and 'little king': a claim to kingship depended on the lord's ability to maintain an ever-expanding network of dependants and tributaries on whom he could bestow marks of rank and ennoblement.

As the texts show, these were highly contentious relationships. Any chief who expanded his domains and claimed new rights of 'little kingship' did so at the expense of other lords: at any moment he might turn on the ruler who had originally acknowledged and 'validated' him. In Indian Muslim political theory the term *fitna* has been used to describe this state of perpetual conflict in which supposed feudatories are constantly rising up against their overlords. André Wink has identified *fitna* as the main principle of statecraft in the pre-colonial Maratha domains, and the concept also seems to work for south India's nayaka and poligar regimes.<sup>68</sup>

32-3; 30 April 1801/pp. 33-6/TNA. The Yakarlus (Ekaris) were a group of huntsmen and forest dwellers whose petty chiefdoms were gradually incorporated into the Vijayanagar and nayaka rulers' poligar networks. (H.A. Stuart, *Madras District Manuals. North Arcot* (2 vols., Madras, 1894-5), I, p. 217.

<sup>67</sup> 'History of the family of the Polygar of Tombah', Mackenzie Collection - General, vol. 9, p. 71. This was one of the smaller North Arcot palaiyams: see Stuart, *North Arcot*, II, p. 338.

<sup>68</sup> André Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India. Agrarian Society and Politics under the Eighteenth-Century Maratha Svarajya* (Cambridge, 1986).

In real life all the major realms of the dry zone were born out of fitna-like acts which proclaimed the ruler's separation from his former overlords. The Marava chiefs of Ramnad were the first of the Tamilnad poligars to hive off from their nayaka masters: in 1604 the current Ramnad chief proclaimed his right to the title Setupati, protector of Lord Rama's sacred causeway (the *sētu*) and its associated shrine complex at Ramesvaram. This constituted a claim of independent 'kingly' power. (The setu is the land-bridge which leads to Ceylon, the holy land of Lanka in the *Ramayana* epic.) This was followed by a long period of conflict and alliance-building in which more and more poligars fought to carve out 'kingly' domains and to rule in them as independent lords or rajas.<sup>69</sup>

This process is graphically described in one of the poligar chronicles collected by Mackenzie. The text tells the story of 'Geeda Mak Rauze' [Girdhara Raju], a Telugu-speaking Razu or Raju warrior who is said to have originated in Nellore and to have taken service under the incumbent 'Vaduga' poligar Talava or Salava Reddi of Karvetnagar. The key incident in this military man's rise to power is supposed to have taken place in 1660: after a successful campaign in which the Nellore warrior is given command of a 'peon' force and an inam grant, the text says that 'Geeda Mak Rauze' rose against Talava Reddi, spat in his patron's ablution water and then shot him dead with his matchlock. The dying poligar 'upbraids' his assassin, 'upon which Geeda Mak Rauze fell down at his feet [and] worshipped him': he then swears to adopt his victim's family names when he takes over his chieftom.<sup>70</sup>

For all its grisly details this is not a story of pointless mayhem. The warrior 'usurper' must cancel out his victim's kingship before he takes over his domain, and so he defiles his overlord before murdering him: in 'Sanskritic' Hindu society, saliva is one of the most impure and contaminating of bodily substances. At the same time the victim-king is indispensable; he is still the crucial agent of validation for any future would-be ruler. This is why he is transformed into an object of worship, in effect a tutelary deity whose identity is consumed and assimilated as the new ruler establishes his dominion.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Ramnad threw off the last vestiges of nayaka overlordship in the 1680s. Pamela G. Price, 'Resources and rule in Zamindari south India, 1802–1903: Sivagangai and Ramnad as kingdoms under the Raj', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1979, p. 6; S. Kadirvel, *A History of the Maravas. 1700–1802* (Madurai, 1977), pp. 32–6.

<sup>70</sup> 'History of the Polymer of Bomrauze [Karvetnagar] Poliam', Mackenzie Collection – General, vol. 9, pp. 92–8; Stuart, *North Arcot*, II, pp. 375–6.

<sup>71</sup> Saliva is a medium for the transmission of sacred energy between lord and disciple. The devotee gratefully receives the 'leavings' of his preceptor or deity in the form of prasad; a substance which is otherwise contaminating becomes a source of grace and kingly power. The ambivalence of the poligars' relationship with their overlords is also

### The severed head: the fundamental symbol of power

All the poligar chronicles depict the early history of the 'little kingdom' as a period of epic bloodshed, but in these texts there is one image of slaughter and sacrifice which stands out from all the rest.<sup>72</sup> Even today south Indians see Maravas and members of the other former warrior groups of the poligar country as men with an hereditary predilection for the severing of human heads. The view of the warrior as head-severer is still very widespread in the south, and it is clearly something more than a tradition received from the many British ethnographers who insisted that the era of poligar rule was a time of anarchy and ceaseless blood-spilling when 'neither persons nor property [were] in any degree secure from the caprice, cruelty and rapacity of the Person in power'.<sup>73</sup> The high point of the Moorgral narrative is a great battle in which the domain's eighteenth-century ruler Tambi Naidu defeats and kills a neighbouring 'Vaduga' Reddi chieftain. Because the Moorgral chief has performed an act of conquest and annihilation, he is now in a position to be confirmed in his claims of 'little kingship'. This is done for him by a much more powerful lord, Krishna Rayel, ruler of the nearby Chandragiri palaiyam. In the narrative, the two warrior chiefs make their assertion of validatory king-making through an act of decapitation: the Moorgral raja Tambi Naidu severs the head of the enemy raja and presents it to his overlord, Krishna Rayel.<sup>74</sup>

This notion of dominion being created out of blood sacrifice and dismemberment is very pervasive in the Tamil and Telugu country. It is closely related to the ancient vedic theme of divine sacrifice: in the Vedas the gods create the world and its human social order through an awesome

expressed in the history of the Yakarlu 'Goodyapaut' [Gudipati] poligars. The 'little king' who founds the domain is made to sit on red-hot iron bars to 'try his fortitude' by a greater Yarkalu poligar, lord of the great fortified crag site at Chandragiri. Mackenzie Collection – General, vol. 9, p. 74; Stuart, *North Arcot*, II, pp. 323–5.

<sup>72</sup> In the Moorgral narrative the founding of the fort town is followed by a graphic account of a battle between Tambi Naidu and a neighbouring Reddi chieftain. Tambi Naidu's troops attack the enemy camp: the enemy are put to flight, and Tambi Naidu establishes himself as 'little king' by pursuing the fleeing troops and slaughtering whole ranks of them, 'making a terrible carnage and killing the raja'. Mackenzie – General, vol. 9, p. 61.

<sup>73</sup> 'Collector of Southern Peshkush' [poligar tribute] to BOR, 23 Sept. 1793/BOR vol. 81/6/21 Oct. 1793/pp. 6887–939/TNA. Personal experience suggests that the old stereotypes are still very much alive in the poligar country. During my first visit to a former Marava poligar centre I was regaled with an account of a recent brawl in which a group of Maravas had despatched a group of their enemies: the high point of the occasion, my informants assured me, was the sight of a dozen severed heads rolling merrily along the main village street. Compare accounts by early British officials in e.g. BOR vol. 3561/10 May 1802/pp. 211–12/TNA.

<sup>74</sup> Mackenzie Collection – General, vol. 9, pp. 61–2.

and ambivalent act of sacrifice.<sup>75</sup> The theme of blood sacrifice as a source of royal power appears in Kerala as well, as for example in the story of a semi-legendary Marava hero who was recruited into the army of the eighteenth-century warrior rajas of Travancore. This Marava military man's most famous feat was the slaughter of a monster crocodile which was blocking the army's advance into Cochin. The account says that with the Marava's help the Travancore forces won a great victory, and that after the battle the hero brought his master the severed head of the Cochin raja.<sup>76</sup>

These acts of dismemberment correspond to the offerings of blood sacrifice which were (and still are) presented to the region's fierce hero-warrior divinities. These religious prestations are also perceived as acts of conquest and domain-building. It will be remembered that the deity, often a ferocious amman or goddess, is portrayed as a righteous avenger who kills and dismembers a demonic enemy, usually the buffalo-headed demon Mahisasura. The goddess's festival is seen as the amman's entry into her cosmic kingdom, and at its climax the worshippers offer up a severed buffalo's head in token of her victory. According to the Moorgal text, the raja's offering of *his* enemy's head delights the Chandragiri raja: it is a sacrifice signifying homage and fealty, and it affirms the bonds of alliance and affiliation which now unite them. The text says that the king is 'so well pleased [at Tambi Naidu's] ridding him of a Potent Foe' that he grants him new kingly titles and an enlarged set of palaiyams and kavalgarships. The raja also grants Tambi Naidu a wife from among his enemy's women: his consumption of the dead chief's blood and body is now complete, and the new dominion is confirmed through these newly constituted blood and kinship ties.<sup>77</sup>

Of course Tambi Naidu will certainly carry on trying to expand this domain until he too begins to challenge his lord as yet another 'Potent Foe'. These hierarchies of power and authority were constantly shifting and reformulating: no ruling group was ever stable or 'integrated' in south India, as can be seen from the focus on war and conflict in all the poligar chronicles and foundation accounts. As later chapters will show, these themes of dismemberment and sacrifice also pervaded south India's

<sup>75</sup> Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict*, pp. 81–94.

<sup>76</sup> It is claimed that the hero's descendants 'still enjoy the privilege of grants ceded [sic] to their heroic ancestor in Travancore'. T.B. Pandian, *The Ancient Heroes of South Indian Peninsula* (Madras 1893), pp. 40–1; Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, p. 92.

<sup>77</sup> Mackenzie Collection – General, vol. 9, pp. 61–2. The extension of blood and kinship ties helped to create many other poligar chiefdoms: the first independent Marava Setupati of Ramnad (1674–1710) expanded his alliance and affiliation network by recognising the brothers of his two Marava and Kallar concubines as rulers of Sivaganga and Pudukkottai. Kadhivel, *History of the Maravas*, p. 35.

Muslim and Christian traditions. Muslim saint martyrs or *shahids* and Christian saints who were violently put to death occupied a very similar position, not only in religious imagery but also in the generation of political power.

One final point which the texts establish is that the chief who builds his fort and performs his feats of arms and sacrifice must then aspire to an ideal of regal lordliness.<sup>78</sup> Among the poligars this Kshatriya ideal had little of the Persianate refinement of the north Indian Rajput courts. One custom which the poligars did share with the Rajputs was sati. As in the north, where the practice was adopted as a sign of honour and clan pride among many aspiring princely houses, the burning of widows became one of the hallmarks of south India's aspiring ruling groups. The sati stones which were set up to mark immolation sites and which were revered as repositories of sacred power were particularly numerous in the poligar domains: such displays of honour were especially important at the point when a would-be ruler was beginning to claim recognition from greater and more prestigious lords.<sup>79</sup> This was true of the ruler of the Kallar domain of Pudukkottai, Raghunatha Raya Tondaiman (1688–1730), who amassed new honours and 'kingly' titles through service to the Marava raja (or Setupati) of Ramnad. This bond between the Kallar Tondaiman raja and the Ramnad Setupati was cemented with a marriage alliance. Raghunatha Raya's sister became one of the forty-seven wives of the Setupati (Vijaya Raghunatha Kilavan, 1674–1710). She committed sati following his death, and the custom was later adopted by the wives of the Pudukkottai rulers.<sup>80</sup>

### Warriors, temples and Brahmans: the eighteenth-century synthesis

As population grew and trading activity developed across the western Ghats and the Tamil hinterland, these kingdoms, and with them the themes and traditions of kingship, expanded to incorporate new motifs and religious symbols. These newly formulated expressions of power derived from at least three different sources. The first of these were the traditions of poligar statecraft which were directed towards 'Sanskritic' forms of worship. For these rulers the need to build up flexible religious and cultural links was increased by the new chiefs' dependence on immigrant artisans and other specialist client groups. It will be remembered that the nayakas who ruled from the old Pandya dynastic centre of Madurai had recruited large numbers of artisans including Patnulkaran

<sup>78</sup> Mackenzie Collection – General, vol. 9, p. 62.

<sup>79</sup> Turnbull, 'Memoir', pp. 118–19.

<sup>80</sup> Venkatarama Ayyar, *Manual of Pudukkottai*, II, Pt 2, pp. 760, 817.

silk weavers from Saurashtra. By the early eighteenth-century these Gujarati Vaishnavite migrants had fanned out into Pudukkottai and the other Tamil poligar towns, and their movements helped to spread traditions of opulent Vaishnavite bhakti among the newly powerful warrior court centres. This did not wipe out the gods and symbols of the warrior tradition, but it did add a new dimension to poligar religion. For example in historical lore from the Marava-ruled kingdom of Ramnad, the Maravas' traditional boomerang weapon was re-identified as half of the *cakra* (Tam. *sakkaram*) – the sacred disc-shaped weapon of Lord Rama, which the god was said to have presented to Ramnad's Setupati ruler in tribute to his role as protector of the Setu, the sacred route to the great shrine at Ramesvaram.<sup>81</sup>

As of the early eighteenth-century, south India's aspiring chiefs and rajas were all profoundly influenced by an ideal of kingship which had been current in south India since the days of Chola and Pandya rule. According to this ideal, the support and protection of temples was one of the defining acts of south Indian kingship, and the result of this was that great holy places such as Kanchi, Srirangam and Tirupati had amassed huge holdings of land and treasure. These benefactions continued to flow in to the great centres during the era of poligar rule. Benefaction was one of the most meritorious of lordly acts; it enhanced the ruler's prestige, and it was also an assertion of dominion. Through his patronage the chief might establish a right to tax the temple's pilgrim revenues. He could also gain access to the marketing networks which grew up around large temples, and he could improve his strategic position. Many holy places were located in important fortress centres: the most notable example was the great fortified rock at Trichy which had been transformed into one of the region's main nayaka strongholds, and which contained rock-cut temples dating back to Pallava and Chola times. Most temple towns were also close to the home domains of powerful military groups who could be drawn to the ruler's service through benefactions to their tutelary saints and deities.<sup>82</sup>

With all these would-be rulers struggling to establish themselves, the

<sup>81</sup> N. Vanamamalai Pillai, *The Setu and Rameswaram* (Delhi, 1982; 1st pub. 1929), p. 109. Pudukkottai also attracted immigrant commercial people including a group of Nattukkottai Chettis: as of 1920 Nattukkottais were particularly numerous in the area around the Tondaiman rulers' home territories. See Venkatarama Ayyar, *Manual of Pudukkottai*, I, p. 131; Venkat Rao, *Manual of Pudukkottai State*, pp. 520–1. The importance of 'the exchange of money and the traffic of every merchandisable article' to the eighteenth-century poligar rulers of Tamilnad is noted in BOR vol. 81/21·Oct. 1793/6/pp. 6887–939/TNA.

<sup>82</sup> Tirupati was one such centre, and Ramesvaram and Madurai were situated inside the home domains of the Marava and Kallar.

south Indian religious landscape changed very rapidly in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Brahmans migrated in large numbers to the new court centres, and there was a great proliferation of temples in both the wet and the dry south. In the poligar country these were often shrines to the family and clan tutelaries or kulatevams of the various rulers. Most of the poligar chronicles contain set-piece foundation stories which show how the first member of the ruling line built a great central shrine in his new domain, thus identifying himself as a pious kingly benefactor. Often, as in the historical chronicles which tell the story of the Udaiyarpalaiyam chiefdom, the god – who is usually identified as an associate or manifestation of one of the Hindu ‘high’ gods – comes in a dream and tells the raja where to build his new jungle capital, and which site to use in the building of the town’s chief shrine.<sup>83</sup> The Tirugokarnam temple in Pudukkottai was another of these tutelary temples, and it too became a rallying point for dynastic claims. The chiefdom’s Kallar Tondaiman rajas made lavish benefactions to the shrine throughout the eighteenth century, and its Brahman priests performed the ruler’s installation rites and the various other ceremonies which expressed the line’s claims of kingship.<sup>84</sup>

The building of all these temples has sometimes been taken as a sign of ‘Sanskritisation’ in the poligar country. The widening of commercial networks and the growth of the poligars’ alliance systems are supposed to have strengthened their contacts with the temple towns and the dynastic centres of the rice belt – centres such as Madurai, Kanchi and Trichy. As a result, the poligar country’s rude plains-dwellers would naturally wish to embrace the scriptural ‘high’ Hinduism of the river valleys once they acquired the necessary power and resources: it is this after all which is usually thought of as the religion of established south Indian élites.

It is true that warrior rulers such as the rajas of Travancore and Tanjore, the Pudukkottai Tondaimans and the Setupatis of Ramnad engaged in large-scale temple-building and encouraged Brahman priests and literate service people to settle in their domains. Even the most ferocious of the region’s lesser poligars sought to become known as pious patrons. For example, the Marava rajas of Sokampatti, much caricatured by the British as a line of archetypal head-severing poligars, were renowned for their benefactions to Brahman agraharams in the old

<sup>83</sup> S. Radhakrishna Aiyar, *A General History of the Pudukkottai State* (Pudukkottai, 1916), p. 74. This temple in Udaiyarpalaiyam is said to date from the late fifteenth-century. *The Family History and the Biography of the Zamindari of Udaiyarpalaiyam (Trichinopoly District)* (Madras, n.d.), p. 6.

<sup>84</sup> Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, pp. 166, 348–9; Venkatarama Ayyar, *Manual of Pudukkottai*, II, Pt 1, p. 793. Like many other eighteenth-century rulers the rajas of Pudukkottai performed acts of ‘kingly’ piety at Benares. Venkat Rao, *Manual of Pudukkottai*, p. 50.

Pandya temple town and weaving centre of Tenkasi, the 'southern Benares'.<sup>85</sup>

But these acts of 'royal' piety were certainly not signs of a meek surrender to the norms and values of 'orthodox' Brahmanism. In all these domains it had come to be accepted that the king must have Brahmans to receive his largesse: without Brahman priests and preceptors he could not make the transformation from blood-spilling warrior to divinely mandated king. But these ritualists were still regarded as dependent newcomers. In chiefdoms like Pudukkottai the Brahman population was small and insecure, and as newly settled royal clients such people were far from being thought of as figures of power and authority.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, while the Brahman ritualist was necessary to the kingdom he was always an ambivalent figure, especially in those areas where his benefactions came mainly from poligars. Even when they were not actually making war such rulers were continually striving and contending with one another: a realm which failed to expand, which ceased to build up its armies and recruit new clients and service people had no hope of survival. This made their rulers ritually impure according to the 'Sanskritic' conventions which justified the Brahman's services. Even in the most ancient temples of the rice belt the ritualist sells his services; he must make contact with the same active and contaminating powers and forces from which the ruler drew his power, and so whether he served the king or the temple the Brahman's claims of elite rank and purity were always compromised.<sup>87</sup>

The creation of these ties with temples and Brahman client groups has sometimes been described as a straightforward exercise in 'integration', a harmonious accommodation which confers clearcut advantages on both sides in the transaction. The newly embellished shrine receives resources and protection, and the chief or would-be ruler acquires prestige and enhanced legitimacy. In reality such transactions were as contentious as any other form of domain-building.<sup>88</sup> To give to the temple was to make a conquest of it; it was an act which often required outright violence. Benefaction was thus a warrior's act, a seizing of spoils, and acts of conspicuous piety were far from being pure, pacific or 'Sanskritic'.

<sup>85</sup> The Sokampatti rulers' fame as pious patrons was recorded by the early nineteenth-century British traveller Thomas Turnbull ('Memoir', p. 65). Further details on Sokampatti (this 'very criminal and obnoxious chieftain') in BOR vol. 3641B/26 Sept. 1791/pp. 40–50/TNA; BOR vol. 4366/19 Dec. 1834/pp. 201–6/TNA; Collec. to BOR, 27 June 1837/89/TCR vol. 7967/TNA.

<sup>86</sup> Radhakrishna Aiyar, *History of Pudukkottai*, p. 74.

<sup>87</sup> Fuller, *Servants of the Goddess*, pp. 49–65.

<sup>88</sup> The preceptorial networks which were created by the great mediaeval gurus did 'integrate' south Indian religious life in the sense of providing broad cross-cutting ties of pilgrimage and devotion, but these links were not forged easily or uncontentiously.

Furthermore the conflicts inherent in benefaction were not just fights waged by rival poligars and rajas contending for access to the temple and its resources. It will be remembered that the god of a great temple was himself conceived of as a king: from his *kōvil* (a term for temple which also meant 'royal palace') he ruled over a realm of his own, a domain with real landmarks and boundaries which were in constant flux just like the ever-shifting boundaries of a warrior chiefdom. In some local histories there is a sense that when the new chief or raja seeks to make offerings to the temple there is a breaching of realms, a conflict between opposing suzerainties. This consciousness of dominion is very clear in one of the historical documents collected by Mackenzie, the 'Kyefat [Kaifiyat] of the Boundaries of Tripetty [Tirupati]'. In this account of the temple's holdings and endowments it is explained that the 'Rayels' or kings of Vijayanagar had marked out all the territories which fell within the domain of the god of Tirupati. Now, complained the chronicler, these lands – the holdings claimed for Sri Venkateswara by the Tirupati temple authorities – had been wrongfully 'encroached' upon by the same lowly forest-dwelling Ekari poligars who had been campaigning to become recognised royal donors at the shrine.<sup>89</sup> Here there is no distinction between 'illegitimate' claims of revenue from the temple's paddy cultivators, and 'illegitimate' assertions of benefactor's rights within the god's sacred precincts.<sup>90</sup>

In another text, the story of the Udaiyarpalaiyam poligars, the ruling line's acquisition of temple honours is portrayed as an out-and-out war between king and temple. This particular episode asserts a special tie between the Udaiyarpalaiyam rulers and the great Kanchi temple complex. It begins as a tale of heroic rescue which is supposed to have occurred in 1688 at the time of a Mughal expedition against the Maratha positions in Tamilnad. Fearing that their temples might be sacked, the Kanchi authorities disguise the shrines' three main images (including that of Siva as Sri Ekambareswara) as corpses and send them for safety into the domain of the Udaiyarpalaiyam poligar. Saivite mythology often portrays the god as a frequenter of unclean places, particularly graveyards and burning grounds. What is suggested here is that this flight from the temple to the poligar's jungle chiefdom takes the god into a place which is

<sup>89</sup> Mackenzie Collection – General, (translation of a Marathi text, 1807), vol. 16, p. 476c, IOL. Most of these would-be donors were descendants of petty hill poligars such as the Ekari rajas of Karvetnagar and Venkatagiri and the Velama Naidu rulers of Kalahasti. These rulers all came to claim Sri Venkateswara as their 'principal deity', but also maintained strong links with shrines to Mariyamman and other fierce ancestral kulatevams in Mysore and Andhra. *Ibid.*, pp. 469–512.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*; vol. 9, pp. 48–50, IOL.

impure, alien, beyond the pale of settled society. At the same time, though, it is a place of welcome refuge; the god must accept the poligar's protection, and thus by giving service to the god the ruler is established as a privileged donor and benefactor of the Kanchi deities. But this remains a relationship which is fraught with tension. The story says that one of the deities, Lord Vishnu as Sri Varadaraja, aroused such passionate love in the poligar – the idealised rapture of the bhakta or devotee – that he refuses to release the image when the Kanchi authorities call for its return. The offering of service is now an act of brigandage or 'fitna' and the story actually has the presiding acarya (chief Brahman ascetic) of Kanchi ordering out an expedition to march on Udaiyarpalaiyam and retake the captured god by force.<sup>91</sup>

Whether or not these events actually occurred, it is notable that once again the indigenous sources have portrayed the creation of the ruler's sacred networks as an act of violent aggression. In this case what takes place is a collision between the kingship claimed by the prestigious Kanchi acarya and the claims being made by the newly constituted 'little king'. In the end some kind of accommodation does occur. The chronicle says that in 1710 the raja and a great party of his courtiers and retainers conveyed the image to Kanchi and participated in a ceremony which installed the god in his sanctum once again. In real life the Udaiyarpalaiyam rajas did come to sponsor a great annual rite which celebrated the god's triumphal return and proclaimed its rulers as Lord Varadaraja's protectors and privileged devotees. This was just the sort of entry into major temple rites which large numbers of warrior chiefs and rajas were achieving in the pre-colonial period. But here as elsewhere these were not acts of peaceful 'integration' but a violent and contentious process which was played out, at least symbolically, amidst images of war and bloodshed. The Brahman acarya sends out an army to fend off the poligar; the 'little king' fights his way into the temple, and when the two finally reach an alliance it is as uneasy as that between the warrior lord and his feudatories, all of whom may one day stand forth against him.<sup>92</sup>

Throughout the eighteenth century, motifs of war and conquest continued to play a prominent part in the benefactions of south Indian warrior rulers. This can be seen from accounts of the great cavalcades of prestation which were sent off bearing the ruler's annual offerings to shrines such as Palni, the celebrated Murukan–Subramanya shrine in the western Ghats which had been built up as a great place of Tamil pilgrimage under the nayaka rulers of Madurai. For royal donors like the

<sup>91</sup> *Family History*, p. 43.

<sup>92</sup> P.V. Jagadisa Ayyar, *South Indian Shrines* (Madras, 1920), pp. 77–8; Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, p. 55.

Pudukkottai rajas and the Maratha rulers of Tanjore the annual cavalcade to Palni was a means of outfacing rival rulers. As a result each dispatch of gifts was enacted as a march of triumph which proclaimed the ruler's right to transact with the great holy places and which allowed him to celebrate his power and munificence along the way. Crowds assembled at each stopping point to view the offerings with their escort of warriors, dancers, musicians and retainers; the route was carefully chosen to mark out a strategic path amongst the key towns and strongholds of the poligar country.<sup>93</sup>

The second set of 'kingly' motifs and symbols to be incorporated by south India's new regimes were drawn from the Muslim polities of north India and the Deccan. Just as there was no sharp division between high Hindu religion and the religion of the warrior, so there was no strong sense of 'communal' distinction between Hindu and Muslim in pre-colonial south India. A large number of Islamic motifs were filtered through to the south during the period of Vijayanagar overlordship (c. 1350–1550.) They were kept alive by the new warrior dynasties of the eighteenth-century, and also by the recruits who manned the nayaka and poligar armies in this period. These rulers drew most of their military men from their own kin and caste groups, but their forces also contained Rajputs and other north Indian and Deccani warriors, including many Muslims. Vijayanagar itself is usually described as a Hindu kingdom, but its systems of armed tribute-gathering and the dispersed martial chieftainships which were commanded by its nayaka client warriors were built up in response to the rise of powerful and highly militarised Muslim states in the Deccan. These Muslim realms – the fourteenth-century Bahmani sultanate and its independent successors of the fifteenth to late seventeenth-centuries (the sultanates of Ahmednagar, Berar, Golkonda, Bidar and Bijapur) provided a model of style and statecraft for these Deccani warrior clans, and for the independent nayaka realms who succeeded them when the Vijayanagar hegemony began to break up in the middle of the sixteenth century.<sup>94</sup>

The inheritance of these traditions can be observed for example in one of the chronicles which recount the history of the Udaiyarpalaiyam chieftdom. This text describes the feats of arms which won the domain's founder the title 'Bareed Sapthagaharana' – 'he who severed the

<sup>93</sup> Baliga, *Madurai*, p. 386; J.M. Somasundaram Pillai, *Palni – The Sacred Hill of Murugan* (Palani, 1963). Compare the accounts of cosmic warfare and supernatural attacks on shrines in Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, pp. 77–81.

<sup>94</sup> Stein, *Peasant State*, pp. 366–488; Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy*, pp. 43–6. Robert Sewell, *A Forgotten Empire ((Vijayanagar)). A Contribution to the History of Indian* (London, 1900).

seven limbs of Bareedshah'. Once again the story is told through motifs of sacrifice and dismemberment, but with an added focus on the courtly symbols of the northern Muslim kingdoms. The holder of this grisly title was Pallikonda Rangappa Udaiyar, a Tamil speaking warrior from the Kanchi region who is said to have taken part in a fifteenth-century Vijayanagar campaign against the sultan of Bidar. As a reward for having defeated and dismembered this Muslim ruler, the Vijayanagar king is supposed to have granted his champion a palaiyam (poligar chiefdom). The victorious Udaiyar was also given a set of kingly insignia which symbolised the fact that he had consumed or partaken of the dead sultan's kingship: these tokens included the dead sultan's ceremonial umbrella and several other items of his royal regalia. There is clearly a core of fact in the story: Udaiyarpalaiyam was one of many south Indian poligar houses which incorporated Deccani Muslim symbols into their rituals of kingship. Until well into the twentieth century the domain's court processions featured Muslim musicians who were known as 'Arab pipers', as well as a set of pipers bearing devices which were described as those of the defunct Bedar sultans.<sup>95</sup>

The third set of 'kingly' motifs took hold as groups of ruling warriors developed more coherent and centrally organised state systems. In Maratha-ruled Tanjore this widening of warrior culture involved the expansion of a line of 'peasant' invaders into one of the old dynastic 'core' areas. In the case of Travancore and Cochin this expansion was a response to external pressures, particularly the military and commercial operations of the Portuguese and the Dutch. Like the old Tamil temple towns of Trichy and Madurai, the former Chola capital of Tanjore was the headquarters of a major nayaka domain during the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-centuries. Beginning in the 1630s the south was repeatedly raided by the armies of the Deccan sultanates. It was also in this period that the famous Maratha commander Sivaji, leader of yet another population of expansive 'peasant' warriors, was building up the loose military confederacy which was soon to undermine the power of the Mughals in much of north and central India. In 1674 the Marathas and

<sup>95</sup> From an early chronicle cited in *The Family History of the Zamindari of Udaiyarpalaiyam*, p. 3. In the Pudukkottai 'royal' chronicle the *Tondaiman Vamsavali* (probably composed in 1750) the Kallar ruler displays his martial prowess at the camp of the Deccan's most powerful eighteenth-century Muslim lord, Asaf Jah (Nizam of Hyderabad, 1724–48). This becomes an assertion of Kallar power with the Tondaiman ruler marching to the Nizam's darbar tent 'causing his drums to be beaten until he reached the very entrance'. Drumming was a mark of high rank in Mughal ceremonial; the text uses Islamic motifs to portray the ruler as co-equal sovereign to the Nizam. Venkatarama Ayyar, *Manual of Pudukkottai*, II, Pt 1, pp. 776–7. See Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, pp. 86–7, 156.

their Muslim allies from Bijapur staged a joint invasion of the rich rice-bearing lands of the Kauveri. This Deccani army was commanded by Sivaji's brother; it overran the nayaka stronghold at Tanjore and transformed the town into the capital of a new kingdom ruled by Maratha warrior dynasts.<sup>96</sup>

### The apotheosis of warrior kingship

Tanjore had been south India's most productive paddy-growing zone since Chola times. The region's nayaka rulers had received a large percentage of the paddy product as payment in kind from local cultivators. In effect this was a form of state monopoly; it resembled the monopoly trading schemes which were built up in India's other dynamic eighteenth-century kingdoms, most notably in Awadh, Mysore and Travancore. The Maratha rulers of Tanjore enhanced the region's economic capabilities in two ways. First, they repaired and extended the great Chola and nayaka irrigation system so that the production of rice and other foodstuffs reached higher levels than ever before. Secondly, they encouraged the development of Tanjore's artisan industries and forged further connections with European and Indian merchant groups. Through the export of grain, textiles and other products the kingdom was able to earn bullion for ritual and military expenditures. This made it possible to extend the complex system of rule which was based on redistribution of the surplus to temples, Brahman foundations and servants of the king; as a result the Maratha rulers were able to support a brilliant cultural synthesis of ancient local 'Sanskritic' Hinduism with forms which they imported from the Deccan and the north.<sup>97</sup>

In the lush pepper- and rice-growing lands of the Malabar coast, the key figure in this expansion of warrior power was Raja Martanda Varma (reg. 1729–58) a ruler who began life as heir to a tiny Keralan pepper chiefdom. In less than twenty years, from 1734 to 1752, Martanda Varma swept away every one of the old domains of southern Malabar. In their

<sup>96</sup> The nayaka stronghold of Jinji was overrun by Bijapur in 1638 and taken by the Marathas in 1677. In the seventeenth-century another new regime was formed up in Mysore, home of the Kannada-speaking Wodeyar rajas; this realm was taken over in the eighteenth century by the much-feared Muslim rulers Haidar Ali (c. 1722–82) and his son Tipu Sultan (1753–99) the famous 'tiger of Mysore'.

<sup>97</sup> C. and S. Bayly, 'Economic change and political conflict in eighteenth-century India', in C. Dewey, ed., *Arrested Development in India* (New York and Delhi, 1988). Extract from Proceedings BOR/15 Nov. 1819/TJCR vol. 3198/pp. 173–242/TNA; 'Report of the Tanjore Commissioners, AD 1799. Tanjore District' (printed Tanjore, 1905) TNA. The larger poligar domains also developed forms of state monopoly trade; for example, the Ramnad sircar was involved in the production and sale of grain, textiles and foodstuffs. BOR vol. 81/21 Oct. 1793/6/pp. 6887–939/TNA.

place he and his successor Rama Varma (1758–98) carved out yet another dynamic war-state backed by an army of 150,000 men equipped with modern weapons and ‘disciplined according to the European manner’.<sup>98</sup> Here too a programme of ambitious military expansion was financed by a highly organised monopoly trading system which dealt in the region’s most lucrative export commodities, particularly pepper, cardamoms and forest hardwoods. The new Keralan rulers imposed a relatively light land tax on their subjects: in Travancore, income from the state monopolies was supplemented by revenues from a large royal ‘demesne’ which was cultivated by praedial serfs recruited from tribal groups, untouchable agrarian groups and men sold into serfdom during war. The Travancore rajas founded thriving new market towns and maritime entrepôts and incorporated a wide range of local and immigrant soldiers, merchants and literate service people into their alliance and affiliation networks.<sup>99</sup>

These moves turned eighteenth-century Travancore into one of the most successfully commercialised domains in south India. The state trading monopolies were manned by élite scribal and mercantile specialists, and the two rulers presided over a complex system of redistribution in which even the kingdom’s state rituals were made over into items of commercial exchange. In Travancore (and its lesser neighbour Cochin, which adopted many of Martanda Varma’s innovations) state office-holders were attached to the new ruling house through an elaborate scheme of ranked ceremonial ‘honours’. These included honorific titles and the right to wear prestigious regalia. The system helped to establish an ethos of service and ritualised obligation to the royal line, but it was also cash-based. Each title-holder made a sizeable payment for his rank and ceremonial trappings, and the fees collected under this ranked *adiyara* scheme constituted an important source of revenue.<sup>100</sup>

In Maratha-ruled Tanjore, Martanda Varma’s contemporary raja Pratab Singh (1739–63) presided over a similar system of commercialised warrior rule. Both of these ruling lines were quick to reach out to all available sources of skill and collaboration. In Travancore as in so many of India’s other expanding eighteenth-century realms, the rulers’ new sources of revenue allowed them to build up a formidable new army

<sup>98</sup> Fra Paolino da San Bartolomeo, *A Voyage to the East Indies*. Trans. W. Johnston (London, 1800; 1st pub. 1796), p. 173. A Das Gupta, *Malabar in Asia Trade 1740–1800* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 14–72; Robert Orme, *A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan*, (3 vols., 1st pub. 1803; Madras 1861–2), I, p. 400; P. Shungoony Menon, *A History of Travancore from the Earliest Times* (2 vols., 1st pub. 1878; repr. New Delhi, 1984), I, pp. 114–85.

<sup>99</sup> Bayly and Bayly, ‘Economic change’.

<sup>100</sup> See my ‘Hindu kingship and the origin of community’, pp. 187–91, *MAS* 18:2 (1984), pp. 177–213.

trained by European mercenaries, equipped with modern rifles and artillery and manned by a wide range of local and immigrant military men. The Travancore rulers recruited Pathan officers from the Deccan as well as large numbers of Marava warriors from the Tamil poligar country. Pratab Singh was equally wide-ranging in his search for soldiers and service people, including Maratha 'revenue Brahmans', and Maratha and Muslim soldiers.<sup>101</sup>

In both of these wet-zone kingdoms, the traditions of warrior religion were far from being subsumed into Brahmanical 'high' Hinduism. Instead, their warrior culture was broadened and expanded as the two groups of rulers found new sources of strategic and ceremonial support. One important class of recruits came from the special class of celibate renouncer Brahmans who were revered as living repositories of the divine. These sanyasi or ascetic Brahmans were accorded great power in the teachings of the bhakti devotional movements. By offering complete submission to a chosen renouncer, the devotee could aspire to a state of ecstatic union with the deity. The most eminent of these renouncers were the sectarian leaders and acaryas or '*swamis*' who controlled the monastic centres (*maths*) attached to Kanchi and a number of other powerful wet-zone temples. These masters possessed a king's standing and authority, and so it was a great coup if a ruler could persuade one of them to take on the role of royal guru or spiritual preceptor, and to endow him with the sacred *mantra* or formula which initiated him as the guru's disciple. In 1686 the second Maratha raja of Tanjore persuaded the swami of the Sri Sankaracarya math at Kanchi to settle in his new domain. This was one of the key acts of Maratha state-building in Tanjore, and throughout its history the ruling house retained strong ties to the line of successor-gurus who inherited the power and status of this first royal swami.<sup>102</sup>

By the eighteenth century the warrior lords of the poligar country were beginning to acquire royal gurus of their own. One such figure was Sadasiva Brahmendra Sarasvati, a typical Brahman sage from Tanjore. This learned renouncer was installed as royal guru to the Pudukkottai ruler Vijaya Raghunatha Tondaiman (1730–69). The state's royal chronicle lore portrays this sanyasi as a supernaturally endowed forest wanderer whose heroic austerities resembled those of the *rishis* (super-human devotees from Hindu mythology). He is said to have spent three months submerged in the sacred river Kauveri and to have awakened

<sup>101</sup> Until recently many Marava clans took pride in the memory of ancestral service under the eighteenth-century rulers of Travancore. T.B. Pandian, *The Ancient Heroes of South Indian Peninsula* (Madras, 1893), pp. 40–1.

<sup>102</sup> Buchanan, *Journey from Madras*, I, pp. 21–3, 145; Jagadisa Ayyar, *South Indian Shrines*, p. 80.

from his trance when someone digging near the spot 'casually wounded him and drew blood from his body'. This is a motif which is very common in Saivite stalapurana texts (accounts of the powers and origins of Tamil temples) and as chapter 3 will show, it is also a feature of the devotional literature which describes south Indian Muslim forest saints. In this case the image endows the sage with the divinity of Lord Siva, and this in turn helped to create a sense of identity for the new state: the deified guru is still revered as the state's supernatural patron and the guardian of its prosperity.<sup>103</sup>

In 1738 the Pudukkottai ruler received the guru's *dakṣiṇamurti mantram* or secret formula of initiation. The act created a bond of total unity between raja and preceptor. It was perceived as a form of rebirth which enhanced the prestige of the Kallar ruler and his line, and it therefore belonged to a larger category of transformation ceremonies which were being undertaken by many other new warrior rulers at this time. In the poligar country many of these warrior dynasts sought to assert kingly rank by instituting a lavish state ritual, the *Navarāttiri*, which symbolised the ruling warrior's conquest of the new kingdom in the name of its patron goddess.<sup>104</sup> In Travancore and Tanjore, and in some of the poligar domains, these rites also included a remarkably graphic ceremony of rebirth, the *Hiranyagarbha* (literally 'golden womb').

As performed in the south Indian warrior kingdoms the ritual's chief artefact was a life-size cow, usually made of gold or gilded bronze. Although this might be thought of as a rite denoting Brahmanical purity, it is best understood as a means of confirming or enhancing the powers of a martial ruler. When the nayaka ruler of Tanjore performed the *Hiranyagarbha* in 1659, he had just lost a battle and was in need of a means to restore his martial energies.<sup>105</sup> In this version of the ritual the ruler was ushered into the body of the cow by his chief Brahman ritualist: he then went through the motions of being reborn from the cow's womb into the

<sup>103</sup> Venkat Rao, *Manual of Pudukkottai State*, pp. 48–49; Venkatarama Ayyar, *Manual of Pudukkottai*, II, Pt 1, p. 792; Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, pp. 166–7.

<sup>104</sup> Ramnad's first Navarattiri was in 1659; the Mysore kingdom's in 1647. Caral Appadurai Breckenridge, 'From protector to litigant – changing relations between Hindu temples and the Raja of Ramnad' p. 88, *IESHR* 14:1 (1977), pp. 75–106; Price, 'Resources and rule', pp. 265–335.

<sup>105</sup> Described in 1659 by the Jesuit missionary Fr. Proenza quoted in J.S. Chandler, ed., *History of the Jesuit Mission in Madura, South India in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries* (Madras, 1909), p. 6. The *Hiranyagarbha* was first celebrated in Udaiyarpalaiyam in the middle of the eighteenth century; it was associated with another newly settled client group, Komati trader-bankers. One of them supplied all the gold for the domain's first *Hiranyagarbha* ritual. See also Breckenridge, 'From Protector to litigant', p. 91.

arms of the Brahman's wife. She played the role of midwife, rocking and caressing him while he cried like an infant.<sup>106</sup>

This performance was intended to transform the very essence and being of the ruler, and it was always accompanied by massive gifting to the ruler's client Brahman groups. In Travancore, where the golden cow rite was first celebrated during the reign of Martanda Varma, these were mostly Tamil and Maratha Brahmans who had been specially brought in to enlarge the domain's very limited Brahman presence.<sup>107</sup> In Travancore too, though, the Hiranyagarbha was a warrior's act, an assertion of power and kingship. In a text from this Keralan realm the Hiranyagarbha and the acts of conspicuous piety which accompany it are portrayed as a confirmation of conquest. First, there is an account of the acts of war and slaughter by which Martanda Varma first establishes his rule.<sup>108</sup> It is then explained that the ruler has summoned his officers of state and proclaims the building of two great royal temples within the state:

thus we have done in charity but now I am desirous of wearing the Janava [sacred thread] . . . round the neck and I am informed by the learned Bramins [*sic*] that to enable me to do so I should have a Golden Cow made and must worship it, after which I am to entertain many Bramins and make them glad, then may I wear the sacerdotal thread.<sup>109</sup>

What has happened here is that the warrior rulers have accepted the importance of 'Sanskritic' Brahmanism, but they have succeeded in absorbing it into their kingly status rather than allowing it to define or dominate them. Like the new north Indian warrior rulers (including the Marathas of the Deccan states) the Keralan and Tanjore rajas became prominent patrons of shrines and *dharamshalas* (pilgrims' rest houses) at Benares; they established ties with major regional temples in Tamilnad and sponsored great state pilgrimages to the main all-India holy places. Within their home domains they rebuilt and endowed dozens of maths and temples and established chains of institutions known as *uttupuras* or *chattrams* in which thousands of Brahmans were fed and lodged at state

<sup>106</sup> Proenza in Chandler, *History of the Jesuit Mission in Madura*.

<sup>107</sup> Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance. Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908* (London, 1976), p. 4; Paolino, *Voyage*, pp. 172-3; A.P. Ibrahim Kunju, *Rise of Travancore. A Study in the Life and Times of Martanda Varma* (Trivandrum, 1976), pp. 117-19; Samuel Mateer, 'The Land of Charity'. *A Descriptive Account of Travancore and its People* (London, 1871), pp. 169-70.

<sup>108</sup> The ruler lures all the petty chiefs in the realm to a 'party of pleasure' in a seaside pavilion. They are thrown into the sea and the raja '[takes] possession of all their effects for the Circar'. From the 'Historical Memoir of Malleeyal or Nunjanaud [Nanjenad: southern Kerala] Dachana' in Mackenzie Collection - General, vol. 5, pp. 31-6, IOL; (transcribed for Mackenzie in 1804).

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

expense.<sup>110</sup> There were also lavish new state festivals such as the Travancore *Tirappadidanam* which enacted the giving of the kingdom into the possession of the royal patron divinity Sri Padmanabha. According to a contemporary British traveller, this act of dominion made the ruler's subjects 'look up to the rajah with a degree of respect bordering on devotion . . . he is . . . considered [to be] the sacred representation of the tutelary divinity of the country . . . to whom the country is dedicated and belongs'.<sup>111</sup>

All these acts helped to confirm the creation of a new state-level culture of kingship and pious patronage, but it was a culture which never lost sight of its martial roots. This is why the Tanjore rulers inscribed their Maratha lineage and the story of their forebears' martial exploits on the walls of the great Sri Brahdisvara temple in the kingdom's capital. It also explains the Travancore rajas' decision to revive Kerala's old mediaeval network of *kalari* gymnasias under which young boys had been trained to arms under the tuition of master warriors known as *panikkars*. These panikkars were venerated as spiritual masters or gurus by their warrior disciples. At the same time Martanda Varma and his successors were able to draw in new fighting men from the Deccan and Tamilnad: these men of low-caste or unclassifiable martial predator origins were then integrated with the élite Nayars of the old *kalari* tradition.<sup>112</sup>

Similarly, in the Travancore *Tirappadidanam* rite which proclaimed the state to be *sri pantaravaka*, the property of the deity, the dominion was personified in the form of a warrior's sword. The idea of the ritual was that the kingdom was to be ruled by the raja as a sacred trust on behalf of the god. Rites like this allowed the rulers to confirm the recruitment of new allies and client groups within a broad and open-ended state system. One expression of this was the great procession of warriors, revenue

<sup>110</sup> Shungoony Menon, *History of Travancore*, I, p. 168. In Travancore the building of *uttupuras* gave the state its reputation as *dharmabhumi*, 'land of charity' or, more properly, the land of dharmic order or right moral conduct. (With the aim of deriding the rulers' 'wasteful' spending on shrines and ritual, the LMS missionary Samuel Mateer used this first translation of *dharmabhumi* as the title for his *Descriptive Account* of the state and its people. *Land of Charity*, pp. 1, 17–18. See Shungoony Menon, *History of Travancore*, I, p. 118; F.R. Hemingway, *Madras District Gazetteers. Tanjore*, I (Madras, 1906), pp. 140–1. There is an illustrated chronicle of the visit of the maharaja of Tanjore to Benares in 1821, preserved in the Sarasvati Mahal Library, Tanjore. The Pudukkottai rulers too performed acts of pious benefaction at Benares. See Venkat Rao, *Manual of Pudukkottai State*, p. 50; Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, p. 166.

<sup>111</sup> BOR vol. 3569/13 Feb. 1809/pp. 149–51/TNA; Ibrahim Kunju, *Rise of Travancore*, p. 172.

<sup>112</sup> For a translation of the Tanjore temple inscriptions see the *Bhonsle Vamsa Charitra. Being the Marathi Historical Inscriptions in the Big Temple, Tanjore*. Tanjore Sarasvati Mahal Series No. 46. (reprinted Tanjore, 1980); Shungoony Menon, *History of Travancore*, I, p. 118.

officials and court notables who marched in the annual Travancore Tirappadidanam.<sup>113</sup> As chapter 7 will show, such rituals allowed almost anyone including Christians and Muslims (as well as the low-ranking Tamil and Deccani military groups described above) to be incorporated into the ruler's alliance and affiliation networks: there was nothing exclusive or 'Brahmanical' about these rituals or the concept of divinely sanctioned polity which they sought to confirm.

All these domains continued to combine their new-found 'Sanskritic' rites with the worship of fierce blood-taking warrior deities. On the Malabar coast the ferocious Bhagavati maintained her role as family tutelary to the Travancore rajas.<sup>114</sup> Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Kallars' deified clan hero Muni or Munisveran was still revered as the original tutelary of the Pudukkottai palace and capital. His temples were built up by the Tondaiman rajas, and this violent and destructive god was perceived as a continuing presence within the realm.<sup>115</sup>

### Conclusion

There are three issues which have arisen from this chapter and will be critical in trying to understand the impact of Islam and Christianity on south India. The first is the crucial importance of warlike power divinities at the village or lineage level of Tamil religion. To a large extent the successes of Muslim Sufi teachers and Christian missionaries in the region were to depend on their capacity to set up some kind of viable relationship with these divinities. This could involve assimilation or some form of open conflict, but in either case it was necessary for the bearer of new religious teachings to recognise and transact with these figures of power.

The other side of this was the willingness of kin groups or loosely organised 'tribal' units to redefine their corporate solidarities around the external forms of religious power which were being brought into the

<sup>113</sup> Shungoony Menon, *History of Travancore*, I, p. 171; Ibrahim Kunju, *Rise of Travancore*, p. 172.

<sup>114</sup> The Bhagavati Shrine at Attingal had particularly close links with the Travancore royal house. Bernier, *Temple Arts*, p. 1.

<sup>115</sup> The temple of the meat-eating male god of Sastankovil (sixteen miles from Pudukkottai town) was another recipient of largesse from the Pudukkottai rulers. It was said that 'knowing elders' could trace the special route or *āttam* which Muni had marked out as his triumphal way through Pudukkottai town; he visited his wrath on anyone who dared to build a house across his invisible pathway. Venkat Rao, *Manual of Pudukkottai State*, p. 541. The concept of the god's 'royal' procession route provides a focus for most south Indian temple festivals: the importance of this concept for Tamil Christians will be discussed in chapters 9 and 11.

south. At the same time the *realpolitik* of the emerging poligar domains and wet-zone states in Travancore and Tanjore would determine their predispositions to favour or to discourage such changes in religious affiliation. As we shall see, some polities in conflict with others might adopt one of the conversion religions in the same way that a Japanese *daimyo* (feudal lord) might convert to Christianity as a sign of religious or political independence from an overlord.

Finally, religious life in these areas of the south remained in a state of flux. Caste identities were extremely malleable, and the role of the Brahman was that of a catalyst rather than a representative of a dominant hierarchy. Religious cults were volatile and ephemeral, and were based around traditions of warrior heroism or bhakti devotionism. In this context Christianity and Islam both became features of the independent religious and political life of south India. As the rest of this volume will show, they were not products of 'missionary imperialism' or of unilineal 'Islamisation.'

## *The development of Muslim society in Tamilnad*

### Introduction

The preceding chapter sought to show that pre-colonial south India was far from being a bastion of high Brahmanical orthodoxy. State power and religion were becoming ever more closely intertwined in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Techniques of statecraft were eclectic, and the dynamic new regimes of the south offered their patronage to an extremely wide range of shrines and holy places. As a result, south Indian 'Hinduism' – or the traditions which were forming into something which we now identify as formal Hinduism – was neither stultified nor monolithic at this time. Even though there was a broad trend towards more lavish forms of temple-centred religion, there were no clearcut boundaries between Sanskrit temple worship, the *bhakti* cult tradition, and the so-called Hindu 'folk' tradition with its peys, pattavans and blood-drinking amman goddesses: all these forms of faith and worship came to overlap and invigorate one another. The result was not a progressive standardising of religious life and a trend towards textual 'orthodoxy' and 'high culture', but a process of mutual stimulation. All areas of religious life were enriched and revitalised by this process of exchange.

What then of the large numbers of Tamils and Malayalis who took on some form of Muslim affiliation in the pre-colonial period? According to the 1901 Census of India, the Tamil country contained nearly 830,000 Muslims out of a total population of just under twenty million. Assuming a total population of about twelve million in 1800, this would mean that there were about 600,000 professing Muslims in the Tamil country at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Here too we have a population of great

<sup>1</sup> Allowing for numerical inaccuracies, the best estimate would be a Muslim population of 4 to 5 per cent, with the highest concentrations (up to about 6 per cent) in the Tamil districts containing former poligar chiefdoms and populations of coastal traders (as in Tirunelveli, Ramnad, Madurai and Tanjore). There were also substantial numbers of Muslims on the Telugu-speaking fringes of the Tamil country, especially along the coast and in hinterland centres such as Penukonda. Malabar district, with a population of 2.8 million in the 1901 Census, contained the highest concentration of Muslims in south India: 833,000, of whom the majority were Malayalam-speaking Mappilas. A large proportion of these Mappilas were recent converts who embraced Islam during the nineteenth-century. Thus although the two populations were roughly equal in size by

diversity, ranging from self-consciously 'Islamic' communities of traders, scholars and service people, to semi-literate farming, weaving and fishing groups for whom Islam involved much flexibility and accommodation to local social and religious traditions. In the next five chapters on south Indian Islam, the questions to be asked are, first, how did Islam take root in south Indian society; secondly, how did the spread of Muslim faith and worship come to affect this broadly based regional culture; and thirdly, how far did the key historical developments of the period – the formation of pre-colonial states and the transition to European rule – help to reshape Muslim belief and observance in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries?

This cannot be a study of 'high' culture only. South India has a great wealth of mosques, *madrastas*, 'mainstream' Sufi *khanaqahs* (teaching hospices) and other learned foundations, but there is also a profusion of Muslim cult centres and holy places ranging from tiny wayside shrines to rich and famous dargahs (tomb shrines) attracting a continual flow of pilgrims and devotees. These so-called 'folk' centres have been a focus of south Indian faith and worship for many centuries. They are still a potent force in Muslim religious life, and they also have great importance for the region's Hindus.

In studies of Asian and other Muslim societies this side of Islamic religious life has often been disregarded. At best it may be relegated to a second-class domain of 'superstition' and degenerate 'folk' worship. This, it is thought, is not the concern of the historian and the orientalist: the domain of serious scholars must be 'high' Islam in the form expounded by élite men of learning in the great Islamic court centres and urban teaching institutions. In fact, though, the so-called popular or folk traditions have proved to be so long-lived and so closely bound up with the lives of African and Asian Muslims that a work which fails to deal with them must miss out on a very great part of the complexity and historical dynamism of the world's Muslim societies. Both Islam and Hinduism have always been much more than a collection of prescriptive norms, and so it is crucial to ask how Islam actually evolved as a system of faith and worship in different regions of Africa and Asia, and how the world's far-flung Muslim populations really lived and practised their many manifestations of the faith.

But how is one to relate the world of saint cults and Muslim 'folk' worship to the textual or 'high' tradition of Islam? There is no intention here to deny the primacy for all Muslims of an ideal of universal and

1901, the Tamilnad Muslims had originally outnumbered the Mappilas. Figures from *Census of India, 1901*, vol. XV-A. Madras. Pt. 2. Imperial Tables: VI, pp. 26–7.

transcendent monotheism which sets an absolute and uncompromising standard of faith and worship for all Muslims. Muslim literary discourse is permeated by a consciousness of this ideal: at the level of élite debate and learning there is a clear focus on the single-minded vision of spiritual perfection to which all true believers must aspire.<sup>2</sup>

The difficulty comes when one seeks to understand Islam as a living system of worship rather than a textual ideal. The ideal says that all Muslims are one: the reality is that over many centuries Muslim faith and practice have come to be shaped and modified by dynamic regional cultures and by the changing social and political context in which they have taken root. Thus the eighteenth-century Javanese rice cultivator with his reverence for the shrines and divinities of the Hindu-Buddhist sacred landscape was no less a true and pious Muslim than the most rigorous Arab Wahhabi. There have certainly been points of contact between the nomadic Berber tribesman, the cultivated urban aristocrat of Qajar Persia or Mughal Delhi and the Gujarati or Tamil Muslim seafarer. Such peoples would all be united in their reverence for the Quran and their recognition of the haj (the obligatory Meccan pilgrimage) and the other fundamental pillars of the faith. But it must also be understood that the variants of Islam which have come to be practised in Java or north Africa or in the different regions of India have all acquired their own distinctive forms and cult personalities, that these have often differed very substantially from the forms of Islam which evolved in the so-called Arab 'heartland,' and that there is no point in dismissing these complex regional cultures as being somehow 'debased' or un-Islamic or irrelevant to the study of 'true' Islam.

### **Sufis, kings and merchants on the Coromandel coast**

In order to understand the system of Muslim faith and worship which developed in south India, it is necessary to ask how the region first came to acquire a population of professing Muslims. Islam took root in the Tamil country well before the waves of invasion from Central Asia which gave rise to the mediaeval Muslim sultanates of north India. What little ethnographic material there is on the Tamilnad Muslims paints a confused picture of their origins and of the group's numerous linguistic, territorial and occupational subdivisions. There is little doubt, though,

<sup>2</sup> Among the best works on the development of Muslim thought and civilisation are H.A.R. Gibb, *Islam*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1975); Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam. Consciousness and History in a World Civilisation* (3 vols., Chicago, 1974); and Bernard Lewis, ed., *The World of Islam. Faith, People, Culture* (London and New York, 1976). And see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edn (Leiden, 1954-) e.g. IV, pp. 171-7.

that as in the commercial entrepôts of southeast Asia, the early spread of Islam was associated with the expansion of southern India's wide-ranging maritime trading networks. Arab traders and navigators settled along the Coromandel coast as early as the eighth or ninth century AD, and their numbers increased as the region began to play a central role in the international textile trade which linked south India to the entrepôts of west Asia and the Indonesian archipelago. One consequence of this was that as in the maritime port kingdoms of southeast Asia, overseas Muslim commercial men rose to prominence in the Tamil country's local court centres. (It is thought that these contacts with Muslim *shahbandars* or port agents provided much of the impetus in the 'Islamisation' of the Indonesian archipelago.)<sup>3</sup> In Tamilnad too, there are a number of Muslim centres which possess proud traditions of Hindu royal 'honours' dating back to the tenth or eleventh century AD. Inter-marriage was also a factor in the spread of Islam: even today the south's highest ranking Muslim lineages are those who can claim descent from the region's early Arab migrants.

At the same time, it is probable that the most important factor in the spread of Islam in south India was the influence of Sufis, the Muslim mystical adepts whose activities are now seen to have been crucial in the expansion of Islam into southeast Asia and many other regions of the Muslim world.<sup>4</sup> In Indonesian historiography the myths of supernaturally endowed 'folk' saints or holy men such as the 'nine walis' of Java are now accepted as authentic if highly coloured accounts of the Sufi's role in the dissemination of Islam. In south India too, Sufis from other parts of the Muslim world provided a focus for the transmission of Islamic ideas and teachings. The reasons for this are well known. The Sufi tradition with its focus on personal devotion and the charismatic power of the *pir* or

<sup>3</sup> P.M. Holt, A.K.S. Lambton and B. Lewis, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, IIa (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 121–54; S.F. Dale, 'Islamic opposition to colonial control' paper delivered to the Cambridge Anglo-Dutch Conference, June 1979. Trading contacts also brought Muslims to the Malabar coast in the seventh or eighth century. This study does not attempt to cover the Malayali Mappilas: on the history of this group see S.F. Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier. The Mappilas of Malabar 1498–1922* (Oxford, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Nehemia Levtzion, ed., *Conversion to Islam* (New York and London, 1979), pp. 16–19; V.L. Ménage, 'The Islamisation of Anatolia' in Levtzion, *ibid.*, pp. 52–67; Russell Jones, 'Ten conversion myths from Indonesia', in *ibid.*, pp. 129–58; A.H. Johns, 'Sufism as a category in Indonesian literature and history', *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2 (July 1961), pp. 13–17. And see R. Oliver, ed., *The Cambridge History of Africa*, III (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 232–330; Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed. Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago and London, 1968), pp. 25–35; Bruce B. Lawrence, 'Islam in India. The function of institutional Sufism in the Islamisation of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Kashmir', in R.C. Martin, ed., *Islam in Local Contexts. Contributions to Asian Studies*, XVII (Leiden, 1982).

saint has provided a natural bridge between Muslim worship and the beliefs of non-Muslim groups in many different regions of Asia and Africa. With their relative freedom from prescriptive or doctrinal formalities, Sufis were able to play many different roles in society. When acting as healers, exorcists and ritualists their functions overlapped with those of local non-Muslim holy men, and this element of continuity was instrumental in the early expansion of Islam. Such adepts also introduced Islamic teachings to non-Muslim peoples by serving as guides to the mystical disciplines of organised or institutional Sufism, and by dispensing *barakat*, the transforming sacred power or energy of the Sufi master.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the Muslim world, the devotional cults which have grown up around Sufi *dargahs* or tomb shrines have served as a critical force in the expansion of Islam into new regions and cultures. It is within the domain of the Sufi shrine rather than at the mosque that Muslim religious life can be seen at its most flexible and accommodating. As Richard Eaton has shown in his pioneering study of Sufis in the Deccan, the worship which takes place at these foundations has tended to draw upon local religious vocabulary and local styles of verse and music, transmitting Muslim teachings in a form which can most easily transcend formal boundaries of sect and community, and thus draw in new adherents to the faith.<sup>6</sup> In the Tamil country as in most other parts of Muslim Asia and Africa, the *dargah* (Tam. *tarkā*) is revered as a place of power; it is a repository of the *pir*'s miraculous *barakat*, a source of miraculous cures and boons and a resort of pilgrims and itinerant holy men ('*faqirs*'). The *pir* (often known as a '*baba*' (Tam. *bāvā*) *wali* (Tam. *vali*) or *āṇṭavar* (Tam. 'lord') may originate as a learned man – a scholar, teacher, polemicist or poet whose original teaching hospice or *khanaqah* becomes a place of pilgrimage and cult devotion after his death. Such individuals

<sup>5</sup> Some *ulama* (singular *alim*: expert in Islamic law) have rejected Sufism (or the ecstatic devotion associated with Sufi observance) because it seems to challenge the primacy of *sharia* (the divine code dictating man's worship and conduct: see Francis Robinson, *Atlas of the Islamic World since 1500* (Oxford, 1982), p. 30). By the ninth century AD Muslim mystics had begun to develop the 'doctrine of the inner way' or spiritual journey towards God. While the *alim* aimed to know God through scholarship and Quranic prescription, the goal of the Sufi was the annihilation of self and the achievement of an ecstatic union with God. The pantheistic teachings of Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240) provided the key formulation in the development of Sufi thought. His doctrine of *waḥdat al-wuḍūd* (existential monism or the 'unity of being') reinforced the concept of the Sufi as *pir*, that is as the *shaikh* or master (*murshid*) to whom a circle of initiates owed total submission: through his *pir* the devotee may realise ultimate oneness with God. See *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1929) 4:2, pp. 681–5; J.S. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford, 1971); Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1975); A.J. Arberry, *Sufism. An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London, 1950). From the sixteenth-century, Ibn al-Arabi's formulations were especially influential in southern India.

<sup>6</sup> Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*.

normally belong to one of the established Sufi orders or *tariqas* which claim authority from a specific founder saint, passing on the order's teachings in a continuing chain of affiliation and spiritual succession (*silsila*).<sup>7</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum are the unaffiliated or non-tariqa Sufis who are usually referred to as *qalandars*, or more loosely as *faqirs*. In south India these include itinerant praise-singers, amulet-sellers and diviners, as well as settled anchorites who achieve renown by walking on fire, enduring fasts lasting months or even years, eating glass and 'vomiting' up knives and razor blades. By the late eighteenth century the Tamil country contained many famous *qalandars* including Imam Shah Mastan of Karaikkal, described by a contemporary pilgrim as 'old, hunch-backed, of short stature with dishevelled hair'. According to the learned court chronicler who composed this account, 'The marks of saintliness are manifest in his face. Muslims and non-Muslims swarm around him like ants around sugar.'<sup>8</sup>

With their beads, matted hair and radical austerities, such men have often been treated with disdain by the representatives of formal 'high' Islam. This hostility has been most pronounced in the case of the naked *mazdhubs*, Muslim mystics who live far beyond the boundaries of settled human society and are held to have achieved their own spontaneous and self-generated experience of divine union. Like the much-revered eighteenth-century south Indian mazdhub Antar Jami who wore women's jewellery and spoke in a voice 'like that of a lady', mazdhubs have often been identified with transvestism, with drug-taking and with many other forms of extreme or anti-social behaviour.<sup>9</sup>

In south India any Sufi, from the most self-consciously 'Islamic' scholar-poet to the wildest transvestite mazdhub, might come to be revered as a *pir* or cult saint, a focus for pilgrimage and veneration and a source of miraculous healing *barakat*. Even when they might appear to

<sup>7</sup> South Indian dargahs are also known as *taykals* (from the Turkish *tekke*) and *ālayams*, a Tamil word for shrine, temple or holy place which is also used for Hindu and Christian foundations. As elsewhere, south India's most widely represented order is the Qadiriya (founded in Baghdad by the most famous of all Sufis, Abd-al Qadir Jilani: d. 1166). Affiliation to a Sufi order did not imply lifelong study of the master's teachings: the devotee might simply bask in the master's *barakat*, and in the *barakat* of the shrines whose *pirs* have come to be regarded as latter-day descendants or initiates (*murids*) of the original saint. Other Sufi orders represented in south India were the Shattariya, the Naqshbandiya and the Chishtiya (the only major *tariqa* to originate in India). See the *Bahār-i-A' Zam Jāhī of Ghulam 'Abdu'l-Qādir Nāziri*. Translated by S. Muhammad Husayn Nainar. Sources of the History of the Nawwabs of the Carnatic. Madras University Islamic Series, no. 11 (Madras, 1950) (hereafter *Bahar*), p. 129; Geertz, *Islam Observed*, pp. 43–55.

<sup>8</sup> *Bahar*, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

have overturned every 'orthodox' Islamic propriety, the faqir and the qalandar were still part of a single continuum which linked all Muslim mystics and which formed a bridge between the traditions which we now associate with formal theistic Hinduism and those which are seen as being part of a separate Muslim culture. As a result the authenticity of their powers was widely conceded, even by élite learned Muslims who found their practices alarming and disruptive. Such beings were valued because of their capacity to cut through worldly constraints so as to make direct and immediate contact with the divine. Their power to attract devotees and disciples made them one of the most dynamic elements in south Indian religious culture.

As in the Indonesian archipelago, the Sufi tradition was probably first introduced into south India by the early Muslim traders and navigators who began to make contact with the region from the eighth or ninth century onwards. Through the agency of incoming Sufis and the west Asian trading people who supported them, a chain of Muslim trading towns grew up along the Coromandel coast from Pulicat (thirty miles north of the modern city of Madras) to the southern Tamil ports of Kilakkarai, Kayal and Kayalpatanam. Many of the richest of these settlements were located at the mouth of the Kauveri-Coleroon and their tributaries in the Tanjore delta. Towns such as Porto Nova ('Mahmud Bandar'), Karaikkal, Nagore, Nagapattinam, Muttupet and Adirampatanam contained great mosques and active Sufi khanaqahs (hospices) dating back to the earliest centuries of Muslim seaborne expansion; Kilakkarai, Kayalpatanam and the other Muslim localities of the Vaigai and Tambraparni deltas also had a rich array of learned foundations and cult centres.<sup>10</sup>

In what sense were these really Muslim towns? South India was a place in which permanent or institutional religious affiliation developed slowly, and the dargah or pir cult shrine was a place at which people of any origin might seek contact with the saint's barakat. All who approached the shrine would automatically receive some sort of contact, however indirectly, with formally professing Muslims and with the doctrines and religious vocabulary of Islam. Some of these worshippers might themselves enter into a formal tie of discipleship with the pir, and through this link they or their descendants might actually declare themselves to be members of the *umma*, the universal community or 'invisible theocracy' which is held to unite all Muslim believers. These stages of adhesion were

<sup>10</sup> Marco Polo visited Kayal in 1292; by the early sixteenth-century the port had silted up and its Muslim maritime people had moved to neighbouring Kayalpatanam. James Hornell, *The Sacred Chank of India. A Monograph of the Indian Conch Turbinella Pyrum* (Madras, 1914), pp. 3-5.

neither inevitable nor irreversible. At any given moment a locality would contain individuals and families who could be located at many different points along the religious spectrum. In addition to the committed professing Muslims and those who were identifiable as 'Hindus' (or members of the sectarian and cult traditions which we now call Hindu) there would be even larger numbers who fell into the great class of persons possessing mixed and overlapping communal identities. (There were also ancient centres of Christian worship and adhesion in the region: their place in south Indian society will be discussed in the second half of this volume.)

Because of their links with the wider trading world of the Arabian peninsula and the Indian Ocean, the port towns of the Coromandel coast actually did come to be identified as centres of formal Islam in south India. By the twelfth or thirteenth century, localities such as Pulicat, Kilakkarai and Kayal (now Palayakayal, 'old Kayal', nine miles south of modern Tuticorin) contained significant numbers of Tamil speakers who could be classed as permanent professing Muslims and were clearly recognised as such within the wider society. This did not isolate these communities: from an early period the shrines of the coastal centres have served as places of resort for a much broader constituency of pilgrims, cult devotees and potential professing Muslims from all over the south and even further afield. Even today these centres attract worshippers from Ceylon, from north India and the Deccan and even from the Muslim centres of western and southeast Asia.

The maritime towns were also places of crucial importance to the pre-colonial rulers of Tamilnad. The importation of war horses was one of their earliest specialities. By the early fourteenth-century the Pandya rulers' armies were being supplied with west Asian horses shipped in by the Muslim traders of Kilakkarai and Kayalpatanam from the great international entrepôts of the Persian Gulf. These Muslims also controlled much of the region's trade in gem stones, pearls and chanks (conch shells: these are important items in Hindu ritual). From the Pandya and Chola period onward, south Indian rulers derived extensive revenues from the ancient pearling and chank diving industries of the Palk Strait, and these traders secured the fortunes of the southernmost Muslim maritime towns. Many Muslim port centres also served as outlets for the international trade in cotton piece goods, which was another major source of revenue for the region's chiefs and rajas. By the fifteenth century Chinese seafarers were commenting on Nagapattinam's commercial links with Sumatra, Java and the Burmese coast; in the sixteenth-century Adirampatanam, Kilakkarai and Pulicat were among the region's most active textile export centres. Muslim sea-going men from Pulicat and Nagapattinam carried Coromandel piece goods to Malacca, Macao,

Manila and Burma in the early seventeenth century, and even in the late nineteenth century these Muslim ports still had links with the great international exchange centres of the Indonesian archipelago and the Malay peninsula.<sup>11</sup>

The shape of these networks was subject to continual modification. For much of the eighteenth century Muslim merchants from Nagore and Porto Novo carried paddy and 'ready money' to the Jaffna peninsula. Their agents made advances to local tobacco cultivators, and the Nagore and Porto Novo traders shipped annual cargoes of Ceylon tobacco to Atjeh and also to local entrepôts on the Malabar coast; Penang too was included in this network after 1786. In this period most of the region's cotton textiles were woven in the specialist weaving centres of Tanjore and transported to ports such as Karaikkal and Nagore 'where it generally finds an advantageous and ready market being a staple commodity of trade to Acheen and the west coast of Sumatra'. Some of these cargoes were shipped through the ports of Bengal where many *maraiikkayar* had established *sāvatis* (secure rest houses for travelling gem dealers); Mauritius too was a port of call for Tamil Muslim textile traders.<sup>12</sup>

All the Muslim maritime towns were dominated by groups of élite Sunni Muslim trading families who came to be known as *maraikkayar* (from Tam. *marakkalam*, ship). This was and still is an endogamous body of Tamil-speaking merchants and ship-owners who maintained close ties to the great Arab centres of trade and pilgrimage, and were also in close touch with the major Muslim localities of southeast Asia and the west coast of India from Malabar to northern Gujarat. It was through these dominant Muslim trading lineages that the region's mediaeval

<sup>11</sup> *The Tarikh-i Wassaf*, in H.M. Elliott and John Dowson, eds., *The History of India as Told By Its Own Historians*, III (London, 1871), pp. 24–35. Muslim trading families in these centres still mention their horse-trading ancestors. See E.D. Ross and E. Power, eds., *The Travels of Marco Polo* (London, 1931), pp. 323–4; Henry E.J. Stanley, ed., *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the Beginning of the Sixteenth-Century*, by Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese (London, Hakluyt Soc., 1866), pp. 172–4, 176–7; R. Sewell, *Archaeological Survey of Southern India. Lists of the Antiquarian Remains in the Presidency of Madras*, I (Madras, 1882), pp. 167–8; K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Pandyan Kingdom* (Madras, 1972), pp. 169–70. See also Hemingway, *Tanjore*, I, pp. 248, 251–2; II, p. 254; W. Francis, *Madras District Gazetteers. South Arcot* (Madras, 1906), p. 26; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Trade and the regional economy of south India, c. 1550 to 1650', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Delhi, 1986, pp. 310–30.

<sup>12</sup> 12 May 1806/103–5/vol. 3174/TJCR/TNA; 15 Dec. 1800/248–87/vol. 3177/TJCR/TNA; 18 Dec. 1800/288–304/vol. 3177/TJCR/TNA; 20 Dec. 1800/531–71/vol. 3201/TJCR/TNA; 18 Feb. 1799/21–2/BOR vol. 219/TNA; Petition to [Lord] Clive, Gov. of Madras, cited in letter from a Nagore merchant dated 24 Aug. 1798; and Pcds. of Comm. of Investigation [on Ceylon trade] 20 Oct. 1798 – CO55/2, PRO, BOR vol. 59A/4 June 1792/14/pp. 2458–63/TNA; BOR vol. 219/18 Feb. 1799/21–2/pp. 1411–15/TNA. See also Walter Hamilton, *The East India Gazetteer* (London, 1815), p. 594.

rulers gained access to this world of dynamic international trade. One of the most powerful of these coastal trading families was the Kayalpatanam line who controlled much of the Palk Strait's pearling and chank diving industries, and who organised the great boat-loads of divers who travelled to Ceylon for the region's periodic pearl fishing sessions. According to a copper plate grant which is still preserved in the town, their leading member was vested by the region's seventeenth-century nayaka rulers with the honorific title Mudali Pillai Maraikkayar.<sup>13</sup>

All other Tamil-speaking Muslims in the south came to be referred to as Labbais. This population, also all Sunnis, included coastal fishermen and pearl-divers as well as large numbers of hinterland cultivators, weavers and other artisans, and petty traders including people engaged in trades such as fish-selling and leather-making: these were activities which were considered ritually polluting according to conventional Brahmanical social ranking schemes. The Tamil maraikkayar have long stigmatised all these other Muslims as being 'mere converts' to Islam, and therefore of lower social standing than the maraikkayar with their claims of descent from the first Arab settlers in Tamilnad. The Hanafi'i weavers and fishermen who actually reside within the Muslim coastal towns are kept at the fringes of the élite social and religious life of the maraikkayar mohullas. Even the leading commercial people of the hinterland – the carpet dealers of Melapalaiyam and the leather and hide merchants of Salem and Arcot – have long been treated with the same aloofness. These divisions have tended to be reinforced by the fact that the maraikkayar all belong to the Shafi'i *madhab* (school of Quranic law) while the Labbais are all Hanafis like the Muslims of hinterland north India and the Deccan. Shafi'i affiliation tends to reflect connections with Arabia, while the Hanafi'i school prevails in the areas where Muslims are orientated towards central Asia and the Iranian plateau. The maraikkayar take this Shafi'i affiliation as proof of their separate and, to them, superior status and identity. They maintain these divisions by marrying with their fellow Shafi'is from the Malabar coast and southeast Asia in preference to Tamil-speaking Hanafi's.<sup>14</sup> The maraikkayar claim that knowledge of Arabic is

<sup>13</sup> 20 Dec. 1800/531–71/vol. 3201/TJCR/TNA; 18 Feb. 1799/21–2/BOR vol. 219/TNA; H.R. Pate, *Madras District Gazetteers. Tinnevely*, I (Madras, 1917), pp. 499–500; S.T. Moses, 'The Muhammadans of Pulicat', *Man in India* 3 (1923), pp. 74–87; Stanley, ed., *Duarte Barbosa*, p. 173. By the early nineteenth century some of the richest maraikkayar traders from Porto Novo and Kilakkarai were bidding for the right to act as 'renters' of the Palk Straits pearl and chank fisheries. Letters to BOR 19 Jan. 1810, 23 Feb. 1810, 17 Nov. 1810, pp. 19–24, 72–7, 246–7/BOR vol. 3586/TNA.

<sup>14</sup> Moses, 'The Muhammadans of Pulicat'. Letters to BOR 16 May 1796/BOR vol. 3553/pp. 89–91/TNA. Affiliation to one or other of the Sunni *madhahib* has been accepted as a marker of shared geographical and cultural origins in the Muslim world. See Levtzion, *Conversion to Islam*, p. 4.

virtually non-existent among the Labbais, and that these 'convert' peoples have deviated from proper Islamic domestic custom by adopting the system of *murai* marriage alliance (preferred marriage to father's sister's daughter) which characterises most of the south's non-Muslim caste groups and communities.<sup>15</sup>

The cultivated Muslim lifestyle which became the hallmark of these coastal centres derived from the success of the maraikkayars' commercial operations and also from their links to south India's pre-colonial courts – 'Hindu' courts as they would now be termed. With the profits of their wide-ranging trade ventures these maraikkayar were able to turn their towns into miniature showcases of Islamic piety. By the beginning of the eighteenth century towns such as Nagore, Kayalpatanam, Kilakkarai and Adirampatanam had become celebrated throughout the Indian Ocean trading region for the wealth and profusion of their religious institutions. Many of the maraikkayar towns' remarkable mosques, madrasas, dargahs and Sufi khanaqahs date back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries or even earlier. The town of Karaikkal, for example, is one of several maraikkayar centres whose dargahs are said to contain the remains of *sahabi*, companions of the Prophet; Kayalpatanam contains a series of fine early masjids including the *periyapalli* ('great mosque') which was built in AD 1331, and Kilakkarai has come to be equally well known for its great array of imposing mosques and dargahs.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The south Indian maraikkayar have a matrilineal marriage system. On matrilineal kinship and matrilineal residence patterns among Tamil Shafi'i Muslims in Batticaloa (Sri Lanka) see D.B. McGilvray, 'Mukkuvar vannimai: Tamil caste and matrilineal ideology in Sri Lanka', in McGilvray, ed., *Caste Ideology and Interaction* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 34–97. Apart from a minority of maraikkayar traders (most with ties to Nagore, Kayalpatanam and other south Indian Muslim ports) the Tamil-speaking Muslims of Ceylon (mostly fishermen and pearl and chank divers from south India) were also regarded as low-ranking 'converts' who practised non-standard forms of marriage and were without men of learning (*qazis* and *ulama*) to preserve proper 'Islamic' customs amongst them. These views appear in replies to an early British investigation into the 'Laws and customs of the Mahomedans and Moormen' of Ceylon (n.d. [c. 1815]): CO 54/123, PRO; respondents included 'the Headman of the Lebais and Marcars', probably the Mudali Pillai Maraikkayar. The British hoped to find *qazis* (judges with the authority to enforce Islamic law) to use as intermediaries with maritime Muslims in Ceylon and south India; their aid was sought in the task of revoking 'irregular' or improperly documented *inams* (revenue-free grants to service groups and religious institutions). Letters to BOR vol. 4706/26 June 1832/pp. 76–8/TNA.

<sup>16</sup> Local accounts identify Kayalpatanam as the site of sixty-four ancient religious foundations. An early nineteenth-century survey of the productive resources of Tirunelveli district put the town's Muslim population at 6,760 and listed twenty-two mosques and twelve Sufi shrines ('*taykals*') in the locality; the town also had a sizeable Muslim weaving population. Kulasekarapatanam (Muslim pop. given as 1,804 out of a total of 3,747; six mosques and three Sufi shrines) was a non-maraikkayar centre: here the Muslims were almost all weavers. From 'Dehazada [general list of villages] and Population Tables of the Different Talooks in the Province of Tirrunelvelie' [1823]

Since the earliest days of their commercial success, the maraikkayar lifestyle has set a high priority on acts of benefaction, and on the responsibility of the towns' trading magnates to foster an ideal of high culture and Islamic scholarship. On the face of it, all this would seem to derive from conventional 'Islamic' values, and from the maraikkayar families' strong links with the Arab world. Over the centuries Muslim mystics and ulama (Muslim jurists, experts in Quranic law) from the so-called Muslim 'heartland' continued to settle in the coastal towns, and these migrants regularly intermarried with the maraikkayar élite. Many maraikkayar attained eminence in their own right as literati and mystical adepts; there are some lineages of maraikkayar Sufis who can trace their ancestry back over fifteen generations or more of scholars and literary men. Other lines of Tamil Muslim traders recruited and patronised the Sufis and ulama who migrated to the maraikkayar towns. By the early eighteenth century the leading maritime families of Kilakkarai and Kayalpatanam had begun to mark their links of élite benefaction with the Arab world by maintaining their own ship to transport south Indian Muslim pilgrims to Jiddah, the point of embarkation for the haj (the great annual pilgrimage to Mecca).<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, though, the nayakas and their mediaeval predecessors provided a model of princely benefaction and largesse which was taken up by the Muslim trading clans and absorbed into this same ideal of pious munificence and patronage. This overlapping of the region's two great traditions of lordship explains why some of the region's most eminent Muslim trading families took pride in using honorifics and titles which identified them with the ideals of Islamic high culture and, simultaneously, with the traditions and symbols of indigenous Hindu kingship. This can be seen in the foundation accounts produced by the towns' literati at the end of the pre-colonial period. A typical account from Kayalpatanam, which was transcribed for the Madras authorities in 1810 but which draws on older foundation stories, asserts a proud heritage of Arab descent and Quranic piety for the town's maraikkayar lineages. The text also makes great play of the rights and honours the maraikkayar later acquired under the region's Hindu and Muslim rulers. The account says,

We came from Arabistan to Coyalpatam Village and purchased the said Village where we have erected 64 mosques . . . and continued in reading Charans [the

Revenue Department Sundries, vol. 39, TNA. (See Ludden, *Peasant History*, p. 225, note 17.) For an account of Kilakkarai (dating from 1814) see 'Account of the Province of Ramnad, Southern Peninsula of India', p. 375, in *MJLS* 5 (1837), pp. 371-93.

<sup>17</sup> Muhammad Yousuf Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic* (Madras, 1974), pp. 458, 461.

Quran] and performed our prayers in those mosques . . . since 900 and odd years during which period we were with due honor [*sic*] preserved [by] former Rajahs and Nabobs [nawabs].<sup>18</sup>

Another example of these links can be seen through the career of the celebrated Kilakkarai trading magnate and literary patron 'Sitakkati' (Shaikh Abdul Qadir: 1650–1715). This maraikkayar notable came from a long line of Kilakkarai ship-owners and commercial men. A family history dating from the early eighteenth century claims that the Sitakkati's ancestors were the main suppliers of horses to the fourteenth-century Pandya kings of Tamilnad, and that one of their number actually married a Pandya princess. Whatever the truth of this story, it is known that in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the family acquired great power at the court of the original domain-building raja of Ramnad (Kilavan Raghunatha Setupati: 1674–1710.) The reasons for this are quite clear: the Sitakkati played a key role in the process of commercialisation which made it possible for this powerful Marava warrior line to consolidate their new domain.<sup>19</sup>

The Sitakkati is remembered today as a patron of scholars and poets: it was he who commissioned south India's best known Muslim devotional work, the *Sīrāppurāṇam*, a 5,000-stanza epic on the life of the Prophet. He is also said to have laid the foundations of the great *jama masjid* (Friday mosque) at Kilakkarai, and in general the family's historical accounts lay great emphasis on the line's Islamic credentials, on their acts of piety and on their many benefactions. At the same time the texts also stress the family's prestigious court connections. As a more modern family history explains, not only is the Sitakkati held to have been a descendant of the Pandyas, but his ties with the rajas of Ramnad gained the family a set of unabashedly Hindu princely titles which they bore with pride until well into the middle of the nineteenth century. Thus as of 1862, one of the Sitakkati's descendants styled himself 'Saiyid Muhammad Maraikkayar, son of Melappandiga Salai Maha Shri, Shri Ravi Kula Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha, Sulutthanavuttul Qadir Nayinar Maraikkayar Avargal of Kilakkarai'. (Most of this is derived from the names and Vaishnavite devotional titles of the Marava rajas of Ramnad. Nayinar, literally 'lord' or 'master', is a title used in many maraikkayar centres by families who

<sup>18</sup> 'The humble address of the inhabitants of Coilpatam depending in the District of Tinnevely', Jan. 1810, in vol. 3571/220–3/TCR/TNA. See also Stanley, ed., *Duarte Barbosa*, p. 173.

<sup>19</sup> N.A. Amir Ali, *Vaḷḷal Sītakkāṭiyaḷ Vāzhvum Kālamum* (The Life and Times of Sitakkati the Great Patron) (Madras, 1983) pp. 69, 87–95. The early family history cited in this work was compiled in 1711. And see S. Muhammad Husayn Nainar, ed., *Seyda-k-kādi [Sitakkati] Nondi-nāṭakam (A Tamil Mono-Drama)* (Madras, 1939).

claim an ancestral tradition of large-scale land-holding.) There are a number of other Kilakkarai families who claim the right to use Tamil royal titles conferred by the Ramnad rajas. The most common usages are 'Iravi Kula', 'Muthu Vijaya' and 'Hiranya garppayagi' (one who has performed the royal ceremony of the 'golden womb': see above, pp. 66–7.<sup>20</sup>

Kilakkarai is far from being the only maraikkayar town with a tradition of high culture and Islamic learning. Virtually all the coastal Muslim centres have produced celebrated lines of Sufi scholar-mystics, most of them based around the region's many Qadiri and Shattari teaching foundations. Among the best known of these is the lineage of the seventeenth-century Qadiri Sufi, Shaikh Sadaqatullah of Kayalpatanam (1632–1703). This scholar-mystic and his successors were attached to a famous khanaqah (teaching hospice) which was founded in the early seventeenth century and which still attracts pupils and Sufi literary men from all over south India, and from Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia as well.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Amir Ali, *Vallal Sitakkatiyal Vazhvum Kalamum*, pp. 93–4; interviews Madras, Kayalpatanam, Nagore: 1980, 1983. Some of these families also claim the title *paṭṭattu maraikkāyar*: from *paṭṭam*, a royal right or 'honour'. The title refers to the role which the Kilakkarai maraikkayars played in the consolidation of the Setupati's rule. *Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> Genealogy of the main line of Kayalpatanam Qadiri Sufis:

- Saikh Sulaiman (1591–1668)
- Shaikh Sadaqatullah (1632–1703)
- Shaikh Muhammad (1667–1722)
- Shaikh Abd al-Qadir (1695–1756)
- Shaikh Umar (1748–1801)
- Shaikh Abd al-Qadir (1777–1855)

Shaikh Sadaqatullah's father was Shaikh Sulaiman (1591–1668) founder of this Kayalpatanam teaching foundation; its adjacent shrine complex contains the tombs of the family's leading members. Another important khanaqah was founded by the Qadiriyya master Shaikh Umar of Kayalpatanam (1749–1801). Like many other maraikkayar Sufis, his son Shaikh Abdul Qadir (1777–1855) had strong ties to the Malabar Qadiriyyas who emigrated from the Hadhramaut in the eighteenth-century. (Shaikh Abdul Qadir's preceptor was the best known of these Malabar Hadhramautis, Shaikh Saiyyid Muhammad Jifri of Calicut (d. 1807). See Dale, *Islamic Society*, pp. 113–15.) Another of the region's major Muslim foundations is the Kilakkarai takya (taykal) founded by the maraikkayar Sufi poet 'Takya Sahib' (Shaikh Abdul Qadir: 1778–1850). (Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 443–4, 451). Like many Muslim literary men Takya Sahib was both an alim and a Sufi: he composed texts on Arabic grammar, theology and jurisprudence; his Tamil mystical verse is still popular in south India and his many pupils included the famous Tamil Muslim mystic Kunankuti Mastan Sahib (1800–47) as well as Shaikh Abdul Qadir Nayinar Labbai Pulavar (*pulavar*: Tam. bard), who composed one of south India's best known devotional poems, the *Nākaiyanti* in praise of the Nagore pir Shahul Hamid (completed 1843). (See below, pp. 134–5) On Kukankuti, see K.V. Zvelebil, *Tamil Literature* (Wiesbaden, 1974), p. 111; Muhammad Sayabu Maraikkayar, *Kāraikkāl Mastān Sāhibu Varalāru* ('The Biography of Mastan Sahib of Karaikkal') (Karaikal, 1980).

By the end of the eighteenth-century, maraikkayar from Kayalpatanam and several other leading commercial towns were beginning to turn their wealth towards the building of the opulent Arab-style houses which are now one of the most striking features of these localities. The houses are grouped together in elaborate *mohullas* (family-based neighbourhoods) and this mohulla system distinguishes the richest maraikkayar towns from all other Muslim centres in south India. In most other localities containing large Muslim populations even successful Muslim traders live in houses that follow conventional Tamil architectural patterns, and Muslim housing areas blend without any break into adjacent lanes inhabited by non-Muslims. In Kayalpatanam and the other major maraikkayar centres – most notably in Kilakkarai and Adirampatanam – the population is exclusively Muslim, and the tightly knit mohulla system has long operated as the vehicle for an ideal of purity and Islamic conformity. Each mohulla came to support its own mosque, and by the early nineteenth-century, each mohulla had built a network of women's lanes running behind all the houses. In most of these centres women are still veiled and confined to the female precincts of their mohullas: they have their own prayer halls, and abstain from all public contacts apart from the Quranic recitations which they hold within each mohulla.<sup>22</sup>

For all their austerity, their commitment to élite scriptural learning and piety and their insistence on the purity of the towns' Islamic lifestyle, the Tamil maraikkayar have long perceived themselves as being part of a much wider world of shared faith and practice. Although they claim never to have intermarried with non-maraikkayar, their *pir* shrines and *kanturi* (death anniversary) festivals have attracted devotees from almost every class and community including low-status hinterland and coastal Labbais and members of the region's non-Muslim cultivating and service populations. The richest of these commercial families built up *jajmani*-style relationships with families of Acari carpenters and other specialist service groups from nearby villages.

Even the maraikkayars' élite literary activities have served as a linking force between the 'purist' ports and the wider world of Tamil *bhakti* (sectarian devotional Hinduism). Although the towns' great Sufis were literate in Arabic, the maraikkayar did not turn to Arabic (or indeed to Urdu) as their sole medium of worship and religious scholarship. Instead the maraikkayar were among the most active figures in the development

<sup>22</sup> Interviews, Kayalpatanam, Kulasekarapatanam, Nagore and other centres, Dec.–March 1980; Jan.–April 1983. The maraikkayar towns are also known for the elaborate tombs which house the remains of great literati and other notables: one of the largest is the tomb of the 'Sitakkati' in Kilakkarai.

of south India's distinctive hybrid literary language, Arabic–Tamil, which consists of a mixture of Tamil and Arabic word forms written in Arabic characters. The use of this language reached its height during the early eighteenth century in the works of the most celebrated of all Tamil Muslim literary men, Umaru Pulavar (born c. 1665): it was this poet who received the Sitakatti's commission to compose the *Sirappuranam*. Like the Sitakatti himself, Umaru's career was built up on patronage from two Tamil warrior courts. His father had been a Muslim scent and spice dealer at the court of the poligar raja of Ettaiyapuram. His early instruction in Tamil came from the poligar's Hindu court poet, and he then became connected with the Ramnad court as a protégé of the Sitakatti. Most striking of all is the fact that this poet's *Sirappuranam* epic was explicitly based on the Tamil version of the *Ramayana*: Umaru influenced a whole range of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literati who adapted Tamil devotional verse forms for the composition of Muslim praise poems and other sacred works.<sup>23</sup>

### Islam penetrates the south Indian hinterland

The next stage in the development of the south Indian Muslim population was the spread of Islam into the Tamil hinterland. The faith probably took root in the inland regions of the south as early as the thirteenth to fourteenth century AD. Although there was no sustained period of Muslim rule in the far south until the eighteenth century, during the middle of the fourteenth century there were two brief episodes of north Indian Muslim military penetration into the Tamil country, and a short-lived Muslim 'sultanate' was founded at Madurai in AD 1334.<sup>24</sup> This was not a story of conversion by conquest, however. In inland south India, too, trade and the Sufi tradition went hand in hand, as the needs of expanding states and chiefdoms helped to draw Muslims – or persons affiliated with Muslim shrines and cult networks – into new centres of trade and production in the interior. By the time of the later Pandyas, maraikayar traders from the coast appear to have been in contact with

<sup>23</sup> K.V. Zvelebil, *Tamil Literature* (Leiden and Koln, 1975), pp. 262–3; M.M. Uwise, 'Muslim literary forms in Tamil literature', in R.E. Asher, ed., *Proceedings of the Second International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies*, II (Madras, 1971), pp. 182–9. See also G. John Samuel, *Studies in Tamil Poetry* (Madras, 1978), pp. 62–72; C. and H. Jesudasan, *A History of Tamil Literature* (Calcutta, 1961), pp. 234–6; M. Mauroof, 'Aspects of religion, economy and society among the Muslims of Ceylon', pp. 71–2, in T.N. Madan, ed., *Muslim Communities of South Asia, Culture and Society* (New Delhi, 1976), pp. 66–83; Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden, 1980), p. 124.

<sup>24</sup> S.A. Krishnaswami Aiyangar, *South India and her Muhammadan Invaders* (Oxford, 1921).

some of the region's important inland textile centres. It was probably at this point that many of the region's weaving towns began to build up substantial Muslim populations, and there are signs of early hinterland Muslim settlement in localities such as Tenkasi, Pottapudur and Kadaiyanallur in the present Tirunelveli district, and around the fortress towns of Nellore, Jinji, Madurai and Trichy (Tam. Tirucci or Tiruccirapalli, usually anglicised as Trichinopoly.)

These were all places with sizeable populations of professing Muslims in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Even before the founding of the Madurai 'sultanate', it is clear that the movement of coastal traders into the Tamil hinterland brought about an inland movement of Sufis and their initiates. At an early period Sufi khanaqahs (hospices) began to be established amongst the communities of leather workers and hide and cloth merchants, and among the carpet and textile weavers who formed the bulk of the new 'convert' population. Some cultivators were also drawn to the new faith, mostly in regions adjacent to these Muslim artisan and trading groups. There are also a number of mosques in the hinterland which are thought to date from the earliest centuries of Muslim settlement in India. One of the most striking of these is the masjid of Abdullah Ibn Muhammad in Trichy. This solidly built little structure stands about a mile from the great fortress and Hindu temple complex known as the Trichy Rock, and the mosque itself bears a striking resemblance to the locality's eighth- and ninth-century rock-cut cave temples. The mosque contains an Arabic inscription dated AD 733-4; like the other early masjids in the interior and along the south Indian coastline it was probably built by one of the Arab traders who began to extend their operations into the Tamil hinterland in the early mediaeval period.<sup>25</sup>

This process of penetration speeded up very considerably under the region's nayaka and poligar warrior chiefs. Salem, seat of a powerful seventeenth-century Vaduga poligar, contained a large population of Muslim weavers and a separate group of Muslim leather and hide dealers. Melapalaiyam was another of the inland production centres which were built up by the poligar chiefs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This locality's Muslim artisans specialised in high-grade carpet making; most of the town's carpet weavers were Tamil Labbais, and the locality's commercial life has always been controlled by Tamil Muslim trading men. A more general view of Muslim settlement patterns in the far south can be derived from Thomas Turnbull's survey report (c. 1823)

<sup>25</sup> J. Rajamohamad, 'Islamic vestiges and culture in the history of Thiruchirappalli' (unpublished typescript, 1984).

and from the results of the 1823 statistical survey of the Tirunelveli district. This 'Dehazada' or village census sought to chart the region's population groups and productive resources. Its figures may not be reliable, but it does give a good indication of how Muslim settlements were distributed in the far south at the beginning of the nineteenth century. What emerges here is that the region's Labbais had come to be concentrated along the key hinterland trade routes which crossed the western Ghats into Malabar and linked the weaving villages of the southern poligar country with regional marts and export centres along the coast in Ramnad and Tanjore, and also to the north along the bullock train routes to Madurai and the southern Deccan.<sup>26</sup> The Ramnad Marava country contained large numbers of Labbai weavers and trading people: the buoyant commercial towns of Sivakasi, Virudukkapatti and Rajapalayam, best known for their populations of rich Nadar (Shanar) cotton and tobacco traders, also contained sizeable groups of Labbais who wove much of the special 'long cloth' which was produced for export to Travancore.<sup>27</sup>

The Dehazada states that in one of the most prosperous of the southern weaving towns, the Pandya dynastic centre of Tenkasi, over a quarter of the local population were Tamil Labbais. As in most other localities containing large Muslim artisan populations, Tenkasi was found to contain an extensive range of Muslim religious foundations and was the site of one of the region's most elaborate annual saint cult festivals.<sup>28</sup> In the eighteenth century this celebrated weaving town, which was located near the heart of northwest Tirunelveli's Marava and Vanniyar poligar domains, was surrounded by fifteen or twenty important textile centres containing well-established Muslim artisan populations. All of these were closely associated with the growth of seventeenth and eighteenth century warrior chiefdoms. Vadakarai, which was still a leading Labbai weaving centre when Turnbull visited the site, had been the original stronghold of the Marava line who established themselves as poligars of

<sup>26</sup> F.J. Richards, *Madras District Gazetteers. Salem* (Madras, 1918) vol. I, Pt 1, pp. 260, 272-3; vol. II, Pt 2, pp. 246-53. On the 'Dehazada' see p. 81n above. Turnbull, 'Memoir', pp. 117-19; Pate, *Tinnevely*, pp. 216, 372-4, 485; Ludden, *Peasant History*, pp. 130-4.

<sup>27</sup> Turnbull, 'Memoir', pp. 112-18, 125.

<sup>28</sup> In the Dehazada Tenkasi has 1,710 Labbais (total pop. 6,305: unreliable figures but convincing proportions). It also records 100 Pathans ('Puttani Tuluker'); Pathans are listed in many other commercial and artisan centres. Pathan military and trading people were widely settled in the south by the late eighteenth century: their ties to the first line of Arcot nawabs will be described below. The Dehazada says that half of Tenkasi's 500 looms were in Muslim hands; the rest were controlled by a smaller group of non-Muslim Kaikolars. Nine mosques and ten taykals (tomb shrines) are listed. See Pate *Tinnevely*, p. 469; Turnbull, 'Memoir' pp. 60-1.

Sokampatti in the early decades of the eighteenth century. Like nearby Kadaianallur, this was one of many localities which benefited from the poligars' recruitment of Muslim (and Hindu) artisan and trading people.<sup>29</sup> In the Kallar country too, the new eighteenth-century rulers built up strong links with local Muslims: near the Tondaiman rulers' stronghold at Pudukkottai there are several localities whose shrines are thought to have received revenue-free *inam* or *sarvamāniyam* grants from the kingdom's Kallar rulers.<sup>30</sup>

Muslims were also concentrated in large numbers in the textile and commercial centres of the Tambraparni valley. The Dehazada lists over 5,000 Labbais in Melapalaiyam out of a total population of under 5,600, and here too the survey found a rich array of holy places – eighteen mosques and forty Sufi shrines in Melapalaiyam, with another twenty-five mosques and forty-two Sufi shrines in the adjacent localities of Palaiyamkottai and Nellaiyambalam (Tirunelveli town).<sup>31</sup> Here in the Tamil rice belt it was the nayakas who are credited with the recruitment of Muslim merchants and weaving groups, and there are a number of mosques and Sufi shrines in the region's fort-mart towns with a tradition of *inam* grants from the seventeenth-century nayaka rulers and their local deputies.<sup>32</sup> Many of the river valley's ancient Brahman settlements acquired Muslim shrines and population centres in this period. The village of Manur, praised in local devotional lore as a place of royal benefactions containing 1,008 Brahman houses, 1,008 Siva temples and 1,008 wells, had a significant Muslim presence at the time of Turnbull's visit. The two surveys also found a concentration of Muslim settlements in the Tambraparni weaving towns near Ambasamudaram. Turnbull was much struck by the elaborate mosque and tomb shrines of Pottapudur, and there were large numbers of Labbai weavers and traders at Viravanallur, Kistnapuram, Pattamadai, Kallaidaikuricci and Kottarunkulam.<sup>33</sup>

In this drive to expand trade and production in their domains south India's warrior chiefs also contributed to the growth of the old maraikkayar towns. By the early eighteenth century, key ports such as

<sup>29</sup> Kadaianallur (ten miles north of Tenkasi) was another important production centre. Here the Dehazada found 1,307 Labbais with a total of 157 looms; total pop. was put at 3,797, and the locality had ten mosques and shrines. Turnbull, 'Memoir', pp. 65, 67–70.

<sup>30</sup> One such centre is Pakkiritaykal ['Fakir's taykal'] near Vallatirakottai, five miles from Pudukkottai; others are at Vailogam and Pallivassal, site of the Kat Bava dargah (to be described in chapter 3). Venkat Rao, *Manual of the Pudukkottai State*, p. 479, 516, 536.

<sup>31</sup> Turnbull, 'Memoir', p. 23–4, 27–8. Nellaiyambalam's Muslim population also included a large number of Pathans; many of its religious foundations probably dated from the nawabi period. *Ibid.*, pp. 27–8, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Collector to BOR 16 Jan. 1849/9/TCR vol. 7977/pp. 8–15/TNA.

<sup>33</sup> Turnbull, 'Memoir', pp. 31–2, 52–3, 55–6; GO 1450/6 Oct. 1897/Judicial/TNA.

Kilakkarai and Kayalpatanam had become leading centres of high-quality cloth production, and the brother of Kilakkarai's leading maraikkayar trader had set up operations in Madras in order 'to further the cause of his brother's trade and to negotiate with the East India Company authorities to open a settlement on the Madura coast'. The Maratha rajas of Tanjore also built up links with the maraikkayar populations of their domains. The chief localities here included the shrine town of Nagore with its thriving textile trade, and also Muttupet, home of two famous dargahs and a major centre for Tanjore's paddy trade with Ceylon, and the rich maraikkayar towns of Karaikkal and Adirampatanam.<sup>34</sup>

The Labbais who resided in these hinterland centres developed elaborate schemes of ceremonial precedence which were much like those of the region's Hindus (and Christians: see chapters 9 and 11). These local ranking schemes were often as contentious as those which were continually being formed and renegotiated amongst embattled shareholders in the region's periodic Hindu temple festivals. Here too, particularly during the colonial period, Muslims frequently came to blows over questions of entitlement to the prestigious status markers which were used in commemorative *urs* (death anniversary) festivals at the region's Muslim cult saint shrines. These tokens of precedence were virtually the same as those used by Hindus and Christians in the Tamil country: they included the right to take palanquins ('princely' sedan chairs) inside the shrine precincts, and the right to use shields, swords and other regalia in local festival processions.<sup>35</sup>

For all its distinctions of rank and ethnicity, however, the Muslim population of Tamilnad has never been truly fragmented. Cutting across all the divisions of Shafi'i and Hanafi, maraikkayar and non-maraikkayar,

<sup>34</sup> From Madras Diary and Consultation Book for 1690, quoted in M.G. Muhammad Ali Marakkayar, 'A note on Maraikkayars in Madras', in *Madras Tercentenary Commemoration Volume* (Madras, 1939), pp. 65–6. See also Turnbull, 'Memoir', pp. 109, 118, 125; F.R. Hemingway, *Tanjore*, pp. 281–2; 'Account of the province of Ramnad', *MJLS* 5 (1837).

<sup>35</sup> From correspondence on 'honours' disputes among Muslim weavers at Kallaidaikuricci: GO 1450/6 Oct. 1897/Judicial/TNA. Some Tamil Muslims apparently classed themselves (and were classed by non-Muslims) in terms of the distinction between 'left-hand' and 'right-hand' (*valankai* and *idankai*) caste groups. This was the way in which many Tamil artisan and non-local merchant jatis and their affiliated service people (the 'left-hand' castes) were ritually separated from the majority 'right-hand' jatis (mostly landholding and dependent labouring groups). These divisions often gave rise to violent conflict over ceremonial 'honours' and precedence. (See e.g. Madras Mil. Consultations vol. 191/18 Dec. 1794/pp. 4935–72/TNA; BOR vol. 481/26 Dec. 1808/5/pp. 11468–9; BOR vol. 161/14 July 1796/22/pp. 7028–62/TNA.) Balfour includes 'Mahomedan traders and artificers' in a list of right-hand groups (*Cyclopaedia*, V, p. V29); see also Moses, 'The Muhammadans of Pulicat', p. 81. And see Beck, *Peasant Society in Konkuk Mines, The Warrior Merchants*, pp. 3–4, 9, 13–14, 80–90.

élite and 'convert' Muslim, there was still a single distinctive religious tradition which formed throughout virtually the whole of the Tamil country. The actual operation of this religious tradition will be described more fully below. At this point what must be stressed is that over many centuries the Muslims of Tamilnad have evolved a common pattern of belief and worship which focuses on networks of pilgrimage and ecstatic cult devotion. It is this tradition which has come to provide a powerful unifying force across the entire region. In pre-colonial Tamilnad there were no clearcut divisions between 'purist' and 'syncretic' Muslims, no equivalent to the 'santri'-'abangan' divide which is supposed to have grown up in Java during the pre-colonial period.<sup>36</sup> Even today there is little evidence that such divisions play a major role in the lives of the region's Muslim population.

The ideal of lordliness and pious benefaction required the maraikkayar to support shrines and holy places. All that really mattered here was the fact that a given site had come to be regarded as a repository of power or barakat. The donor did not feel himself subject to any hard and fast distinctions between the acceptable and the unacceptable or the Islamic and the un-Islamic, and even the most self-conscious 'purists' – the great maraikkayar lineages for example – had no hesitation in supporting the region's popular 'syncretic' Sufi cult shrines. One of the greatest of these holy places was the dargah of the legendary Sufi master Shahul Hamid Naguri. This shrine was closely tied to the state-making ambitions of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Maratha rajas of Tanjore. The shrine's official histories commemorate the Maratha ruler Pratab Singh (1739–63) as the builder of one of the site's five great *minars* (minarets): under the patronage of these officially Hindu rulers, the shrine became one of the most celebrated sacred sites in south India.<sup>37</sup> As will be seen in chapter 3 its rites and cult texts were built up out of the same complex of

<sup>36</sup> 'Santri' and 'abangan' are used to describe the supposed opposition between élite Javanese coastal traders whose religious life is pure, scriptural and 'orthodox', and a peasant majority whose traditions of worship are more obviously influenced by Java's original Hindu-Buddhist culture. For a fuller treatment see my 'Islam in southern India: "purist" or "syncretic"?', in C.A. Bayly and D.H.A. Kolff, eds., *Two Colonial Empires* (Leiden, 1986), pp. 35–73.

<sup>37</sup> Janab Gulam Kadhiru Navalar, *Karuṇaik-k-kaṭal Nākūr Aṇṭavaravarkaḷin Punita Vāzhkkai Varalāru* ('Ocean of Grace. The Holy Biography of the Nagore Lord') (Nagore, 1963: 2nd edn 1979), pp. 84–5; S.A. Shaik Hasan Sahib, *The Divine Light of Nagore* (Nagore, 1980), pp. 21, 31–2, 45; *History of...Saint...Shahul Hameed...* (Nagore, n.d.), pp. 8–10; *Bahar*, pp. 25–32. See also Muhammad Sayabu Maraikkayar, *Nābūr Aṇṭaver Perumai* ('The Greatness of the Nagore Lord') (Karaikkal, 1979). An inscription at the shrine says that it was built by Pratab Singh in 1757. See K.N. Krishnaswami Ayyar, *Madras District Gazetteers. Tanjore*, II (Madras, 1933), p. 253; R. Sewell, *Lists of the Antiquarian Remains in the Presidency of Madras*, I (Madras, 1882), p. 71.

Saivite, Vaishnavite and power divinity traditions which helped to shape the cults of every other south Indian Sufi personality. The Shahul Hamid dargah is located in the maraikkayar town of Nagore, and the élite maraikkayar lineages of Kayalpatanam, Nagapattinam and Nagore itself were among its most assiduous patrons and benefactors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For these 'high' purist Muslims there was clearly no sense of incongruity in maintaining a 'pure' Islamic lifestyle within their ancestral localities while sharing in the ecstatic cult life of the region's pir shrines.

One other point follows here. This notion of distinct and opposing realms of religious belief, of 'high' and 'low' or 'scriptural' and 'folk' Islam, tends to present Asian trading people as the bearers of an abstract, universal and 'pure' Islamic tradition. As people with narrower horizons and a limited world view, Muslim peasants are supposed to be given to 'lax' and accommodating variants of 'folk' worship; because they are close to the forces of nature, their religious life is said to be parochial and localised, incorporating spirit cults and other traditions derived from non-Muslim sources. It is also argued that once Muslims began to have their horizons widened through the experience of overseas trade, or through other forms of economic or social modernisation which give rise to greater physical mobility and an opening up of contacts and worldviews, they will lose this attachment to their 'parochial' saint cults and pir shrines.<sup>38</sup>

Ibn Battuta's accounts of the merchants and navigators who plied the great Indian Ocean trade routes certainly do not support this view. In this cosmopolitan environment there was little to indicate that Muslims who left the 'closed' and 'superstitious' world of the rural cultivator must necessarily begin to profess a high and abstract form of Islam, a 'puritan' Islam devoid of magic, talismans and appeals to the intercessory powers of Sufi pirs and holy men. On the contrary these traditions seem to have been as mobile as the seafarers themselves. It is not really clear why navigators, sailors and seaborne traders should be likely to renounce the use of talismans and magical amulets or to give up the veneration of supernaturally endowed cult saints. All these forms of worship were followed by the seagoing Muslims who were visited by Ibn Battuta in south and southeast Asia. Indeed the high seas are no less full of menace and threatening natural forces than the world of the peasant or land-based artisan. Thus there is no obvious reason why mobility alone should lead navigators and

<sup>38</sup> Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 1982), p. 124.

maritime traders to abandon their 'folk' traditions while rural Muslims retain their cults, talismans and 'syncretic' observances.<sup>39</sup>

Ibn Battuta's text also shows that there was nothing 'parochial' about shrine-based Sufi pir cults. Far from breaking down the devotee's ties to local cult shrines, the creation of far-flung commercial networks worked to widen and internationalise a number of the south's established devotional traditions. In Ibn Battuta's day the major Indian Ocean entrepôts possessed highly organised systems under which the controlling authorities of the port's pir cult shrines would send their agents to meet incoming vessels and collect the offerings which had been pledged by those on board as protection against storms, pirates and other perils. Much the same system of organised pledges and collections seems to have operated along the south Indian coast during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore any notion that the economic changes which overtook south Indian society under colonial rule must have undermined local pir cults can be challenged by looking at the actual histories of these devotional traditions. If the stereotype of the 'parochial' pir cult were to be borne out in fact, then it would have to be shown that trading people who moved overseas in response to new commercial opportunities tended to lose their attachments to the shrines and cult traditions of their home localities. In fact though this seems to have happened very rarely, even in cases of the most prolonged sojourns in overseas localities far removed from the devotees' established cult shrines. When Penang and Singapore were opened up as forward bases of the English East India Company's operations in southeast Asia (Penang in 1786, Singapore in 1824) the maraikkayar devotees of Shahul Hamid of Nagore were among the first Indian trading people to establish themselves in these new colonial port towns.<sup>41</sup>

For these Muslim tobacco and textile merchants, the vitality of the cult and its tradition was certainly not dependent upon unbroken contact with the home shrine. When faced with the problem of physical separation from the cult centre, the saint's devotees simply built replicas of the original Nagore dargah in their new overseas trading bases: each new offshoot shrine was perceived as an equally potent repository of the pir's barakat. Furthermore the trading groups' new operations provided them with enough wealth to keep up the level of cult activity at home in Nagore, to endow the two new overseas cult centres and to support urs

<sup>39</sup> Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*. Trans. H.A.R. Gibb (London, 1929), p. 97.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Letter and petitions from Nagore merchants, 24 Aug. 1798: CO55/2, PRO.

festivals in Penang and Singapore which were just like those enacted at the original shrine.<sup>42</sup> It follows then that in the case of these traders, the result of increased mobility and wider horizons was a widening and intensification of the original cult tradition, and certainly not a turn towards a more 'universal' or transcendent faith devoid of shrines, magical intercessory power and all the other features of the Tamil pir cult.

Once it is seen that Muslim shrine cults were able to gain in range and power with the mobility of their devotees, we have something which conforms much more closely to Muslim conceptions of the Sufi world than a view which assumes that mobility must bring about the collapse of cult worship. As will be seen below, all across the Muslim world devotees perceive the Sufi master as lord of a great supernatural dominion. As he exercises his power, as he dispenses grace and barakat and draws in larger and larger networks of subject-devotees, the lord is seen to be at the heart of a domain which is continually being enlarged and strengthened. It is therefore in the nature of the cult to grow, to widen its reach and appeal, and there is no logical reason why the domain of the cult saint should fall into disarray whenever his devotees make contact with new lands and new forms of enterprise.

Even for those who would now be classed as formally professing Muslims, the impact of south India's expanding Sufi cult tradition was not to bring about a gradual 'Islamisation' of belief and lifestyle. On the contrary, both Hindus and Muslims have looked to the pir and his cult shrine to perform the same functions as any other local holy place. Most dargahs sponsor healing and exorcism rites, and there are many Tamil Muslim tomb shrines which specialise in life-crisis ceremonies just like those performed at the region's Hindu temples. The most popular of these are the rites performed to mark the occasion of an infant's first tonsuring. Many Hindu (or 'Hinduising') caste groups mark this event by distributing alms to Brahmans, and in south Indian Muslim families the ritual is still often much the same: the child's cut hair is weighed, and the parents distribute the same weight in silver to a gathering of Muslim 'faqirs' or holy men from a nearby dargah.<sup>43</sup>

Many Hindus have even managed to domesticate the Muslim concept of a supreme transcendent deity. Across much of Tamilnad, the Muslim Allah was and still is referred to as Allah Swami, Lord Allah. This is a

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* The Penang and Singapore shrines are still active devotional centres; I visited the Shahul Hamid dargahs in Penang and Singapore in 1982 and 1989.

<sup>43</sup> The eighteenth-century nawabs sponsored mass feedings of faqirs at special charitable institutions. These ceremonies proclaimed the rulers' power and piety in much the same way as the mass feastings of Brahmans which were held at the courts of eighteenth-century 'Hindu' kingdoms. Stuart, *North Arcot*, II, p. 306.

development which must horrify even the most accommodating Sufi or alim ('orthodox' Muslim jurist) since it means that both God and the saints have become nothing more than new divinities in a broad all-inclusive local pantheon: their Hindu devotees revere and invoke them as co-equal figures to Aiyandar, Murukan or Siva.<sup>44</sup>

How though do we know what the saint's devotees actually believed about their pirs and Sufi masters? There is a problem here: it may never be possible to define individual religious beliefs or to trace their development over time, and it is even more problematic to try to generalise about the religious culture of an entire society.<sup>45</sup> In south India each shrine has generated its own individual history and cult traditions. Each pir has been capable of taking on many different roles and identities for his devotees: the same saint may appear simultaneously as 'orthodox' alim, warrior avenger and magical healer-intercessor. Even so, by using tazkira texts and other sources, it is possible to make some generalisations about the principles of south Indian sufism. For those who have come to identify with the teachings and traditions of formal Islam, there must be an acceptance of God as a supreme transcendent being. What the Sufi tradition allows is the possibility of an immanent and accessible object of veneration – if not a personification of divine power, then a notion of persons and shrines through which the believer may make contact with divine power (the saint's endowment of barakat or sacred energy).<sup>46</sup>

In terms that an established alim might accept, this notion of the pir and his power is acceptable because it simply complements the centrality of a transcendent and indivisible God. Despite and sometimes even because of the attacks launched by fundamentalist Sufis and ulama, there has always been a much larger body of worshippers all over the Muslim world for whom this notion of complementarity is perfectly acceptable, and, in their eyes, a wholly reasonable approach to the task of living as a pious observant Muslim. At the same time there are also believers – and these are people who have been particularly numerous in India – for whom the saint himself has come to share in this quality of ultimate transcendence. In its most radical form this may come close to a claim that the Sufi is God, that he comes to contain within his person a full measure of divinity and that the initiate may come to worship God in him. As far as the 'orthodox' Muslim learned man is concerned, such claims pose an

<sup>44</sup> J. Chartres Molony, *A Book of South India* (London, 1926), p. 182.

<sup>45</sup> The problem of defining religious 'belief' in non-Christian societies is discussed in Malcolm Ruel, 'Christians as believers', in J. Davis, ed., *Religious Organisation and Religious Experience* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 9–31. On the pir and his barakat, compare Ernest Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas* (London, 1969).

<sup>46</sup> See Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas*.

intolerable challenge to the most fundamental of all Islamic tenets, the belief in a unitary and absolute God.

Not all believers have come to pursue these dangerous doctrines to their ultimate conclusion. For them, it has seemed possible to conceive of a being who comes to share in transcendence without challenging or replacing God. At this level, at the level of living religion with its cult shrines and everyday devotional practices, the notion of a pir who may become transcendent is something which has given great power and vitality to the traditions of south Indian Islam. This has also been the means of forging strong and lasting links with the world which is now thought of as being formally 'Hindu', the world of south India's theistic high gods and power divinities.

### **Warriors from the north: Navaiyats, Pathans and Rowthers**

One final piece of scene-setting is required before moving on to describe the religious system of the Tamilnad Muslims. Thus far this chapter has described the spread of Islam in Tamilnad and the various Tamil-speaking groups who made up the Muslim population of the region. But the élite sea-going Muslims and the various groups of largely Hanafi hinterland Muslims were not the only Muslims in the far south. In addition to the low-ranking Tamil Labbais and the maraikkayar with their claims of Arab descent, the region also became the home of a group of Muslims who see themselves as quite distinct from all these Tamil-speaking groups. These people are only a small minority in the Muslim society of Tamilnad. Their importance derives partly from their claims to be superior to other Muslims in the region: in recent years this has injected an element of tension into questions of linguistic and corporate identity for many Muslims in Tamilnad.<sup>47</sup> In addition, though, these were the soldiers and service people who founded the Tamil country's first sizeable Muslim political élite, and this meant that they had a disproportionate effect on religion and political life in the region.

Most of these non-Tamils claim Dakhni as their mother tongue. This is the southern variant of Urdu which emerged as the court language of the mediaeval sultanates of the Deccan. As might be expected, many of the Muslims of Tamilnad who describe themselves as Dakhnis claim to be descended from soldiers, officials and literary men in service to the Muslim ruling houses of the Deccan. When Bijapur and the other Deccani

<sup>47</sup> Mattison Mines, 'Islamisation and Muslim ethnicity in south India', in Imtiaz Ahmed, ed., *Ritual and Religion Among Muslims in India* (New Delhi, 1981), pp. 65–89; Mines, 'Social stratification among Muslim Tamils', in Ahmad, ed., *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims* (New Delhi, 1973), pp. 155–69.

kingdoms were overrun by the Mughals at the end of the seventeenth century, large numbers of these Muslims migrated to other parts of India, including the south. Some of the Shia trading families of Madras city are Deccanis who first established themselves in the Tamil country after the fall of the Bijapur sultans.<sup>48</sup>

In the case of the Muslim service gentry of the Deccan there were many who entered Mughal service during the late seventeenth century and then settled in the newly claimed imperial areas of the far south. Among these were many high-ranking Navaiyat service families. The Navaiyats were élite Shafi'i Muslims who are thought to have migrated from west Asia, possibly from the Basra region, and to have settled along the Konkan coast during the thirteenth century AD. Many Navaiyats rose to prominence as merchants and state officials under the Adil Shahi sultans of Bijapur. The ancestors of the distinguished Madras-based poet and scholar, Maulana Baqir Agah (AD 1745–1805) were Navaiyat pearl traders from Bijapur; another eminent Navaiyat was Mullah Ahmad Naiti who was diwan of Bijapur under Sultan Ali Adil Shah II (1656–72) and whose son became a Mughal mansabdar after Aurangzeb's penetration of the Deccan.<sup>49</sup>

The first Navaiyats to gain power in Tamilnad were appointed to Mughal military and administrative offices at the end of the seventeenth century when the region was declared a subsidiary of the subah (province) of Hyderabad. Although the Tamil country (known to the Mughals as the Carnatic) experienced very little in the way of direct imperial control, Mughal armies began to collect tribute in the region in the 1690s. With this military presence came a growing population of Urdu- and Dakhni-speaking Muslim settlers and also many Pathan military men. These Pathan fighters came from north India, from the Pathan-ruled nawabis of Cuddapah and Kurnool, and from Nellore, another important south Indian military centre. They were accompanied by Pathan artisans and traders, many of whom settled in the East India Company's southern trading base at Madras; by 1715 Pathan merchants were importing 'great quantities of rich goods from Bengal' to Madras. These newcomers also tended to settle in fortress centres such as Arni, Chanji and Jinji and in Arcot, which became the headquarters of the new sub-province. Trichy, Madurai and many of the lesser fort-mart towns

<sup>48</sup> Mir Hussein Ali Khan Kirmani, *History of the Reign of Tipu Sultan; Neshani Hyduri*. Trans. W. Miles (London, 1844), p. 87.

<sup>49</sup> M.L. Dames, ed., *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, I, (London, Hakluyt Soc., 1918), p. 187, note 1; A.A. Pais, 'The Navayats. An account of their history and their customs', in *QJMS* 10:1 (1919), pp. 41–58; Zakira Ghouse, 'Baqir Agah's contribution to Arabic, Persian and Urdu literatures', M.Litt. dissertation, Madras University, 1973, pp. 37–9, 44.

founded by the region's early warrior rulers also contain sizeable Muslim populations who maintain a tradition of military service dating from this period. Many were Tamil-speaking Muslims who used titles like Rowther or Ravutan (from Tam. *irauttar*: horseman or trooper). Some of these families were probably recruited locally by Tamil Hindu rulers rather than the pre-colonial Muslim powers.<sup>50</sup>

It has already been seen that the Travancore rajas recruited their military service people from amongst a wide range of caste groups and communities, and that there were significant numbers of Muslims (as well as Christians) in the new war-states' armies. This was a pattern which was repeated in virtually all the nayaka and poligar domains of south India, and it was a trend which the early colonial authorities found distinctly alarming. At the time of the East India Company's final military campaign against the southern poligars, it was observed by Stephen Lushington, the Collector of 'Poligar Peshkush' (tribute), that a chief who had succeeded in recruiting Muslim military men proved a particularly formidable opponent to the Company's forces. This was not just because such recruits tended to be seasoned fighters who had seen service with the polyglot armies of the Rohilkhand and Deccani Pathan chiefdoms. According to Lushington, the 'military spirit' of the poligars and their determination to renounce the tribute-taking claims of the East India Company were 'inflated by the Jargon of the Vagrant Mussulman Patans or Rajahpoots, who frequently for a time engage in the service of the Principal Poligars, and while they promote their own purposes flatter the Poligar into a belief in his Prowess little short of heroism'.<sup>51</sup>

Shorn of its derisive overtones, Lushington's point was about king-making, about the idea that Muslim service people could be a particularly valuable adjunct to the assertion of dominion. It is obvious that the would-be dynast would wish to have Muslim artisans and commercial

<sup>50</sup> Francis, *South Arcot*, p. 86; Talboys Wheeler, *Madras in the Olden Time* (3 vols., Madras, 1862), II, pp. 67, 224–5; Mines, 'Social stratification'; *A Gazetteer of Southern India*. By Pharoah and Co. (Madras, 1855), p. 513. Travancore's eighteenth-century rajas recruited Pathan military men to lead and train their armies. Shungoony Menon, *History of Travancore*, I, p. 165. There were several smaller groups of immigrant Muslims (or people with strong but ambiguous ties to the Muslim devotional cults) who had settled in the far south by the beginning of the eighteenth-century. These included Telugu-speaking Dudekula cotton cleaners who combined Hindu domestic ritual and Muslim cult veneration. See Richards, *Salem*, I, Pt 1, p. 104; C.F. Brackenbury, *Madras District Gazetteers. Cuddapah* (Madras, 1915), p. 58.

<sup>51</sup> S. Lushington, *Collector's Report Regarding the Tinnevely Poligars and Sequestered Pollams [palaiyams] 1799–1800*, (Tinnevely Collectorate Press, Tinnevely, 1916), p. 4. The nayakas and Tanjore Marathas were also served by Muslim military men, e.g. Rustom Khan, a nayaka commander who tried to seize power in Trichy in 1680. A. Ramaswami, *Tamil Nadu District Gazetteers. Ramānathapuram* (Madras, 1972), pp. 85–6.

men in his domain. At the same time, however, a chief who wished to throw off the claims of the nawab and the Company must be a man of power, a man of princely radiance, and this was a quality which Muslim service people could communicate to their lord. Thus the 'flattery' Lushington mentions was not a matter of empty morale-boosting. South Indian domain-building had always required the services of bards and praise-singers, and it has already been seen that the Ramnad Setupatis were among the first south Indian warrior chiefs to recruit Muslim literary men to their courts.<sup>52</sup> By the late eighteenth century it was held very widely in the poligar country that Muslims – particularly Urdu-speaking Muslims who could bring with them some flavour of the great courts of north India or the Deccan – were ideal courtiers for a warrior ruler. In addition to their fighting skills they had access to the tradition of the chronicler, the literate man who served by proclaiming and celebrating his lord's achievements.

Also, in addition to the importance of the Muslim recruit as horseman, soldier and Persianate courtier, what the poligar might hope to derive from his Muslim retainers was the curing and healing power of the *hakim*, the expert in the Islamic system of *unani* medicine who traditionally accompanied the Muslim war-band and ministered to its troopers. Here there was a close association with the world of the supernatural, and more specifically with the tradition of the region's fierce martial cult saints. As the next chapter will show, south India's pir cult shrines were perceived as indispensable repositories of power for a would-be ruler. The bringing and healing of disease were attributes of the Sufi adept, and quite a number of south India's cult saints were specifically identified by their biographers and devotees as one-time practitioners of the hakim's art. This set of associations made it all the more desirable for poligars to incorporate such persons into their networks of alliance and affiliation, and there was no sense of conflict with the poligar's equally keen determination to support temples, and recruit Brahman gurus and ritualists.

It is now almost impossible to distinguish between Muslims with an authentic tradition of military service and those who began to use titles such as Rowther or Ravutan in more recent times. During the nineteenth-century many Muslims came to regard any claim to martial ancestry – however unfounded – as being more prestigious than simple Labbai status. This was actually a reflection of European colonial attitudes and assumptions. To many ethnographers of the period, only

<sup>52</sup> The eighteenth-century Pudukkottai rulers also gave prominence to Muslim merchants and military men and patronised Muslim shrines and festivals. Venkatarama Ayyar, *Manual of Pudukkottai State*, II, Pt 1, p. 825.

the Persianate ashraf of north India constituted 'real' or 'pure' Muslims: those who belonged to the vernacular linguistic cultures of Bengal, Malabar or Tamilnad were Muslims of low 'convert' origins. This then is a typical case of Indian society being reshaped according to crude British misperceptions about the nature of communal status and identity.<sup>53</sup>

The most notable of the early eighteenth-century migrants to the Tamil country was Saadatullah Khan (1651–1732), a Navaiyat from a Bijapur service family who was appointed subahdar of Arcot in 1710. Over the next thirty years Saadatullah Khan and his descendants sought to establish themselves as independent rulers of the Carnatic. Like the other Mughal notables who rose to power in the former imperial provinces of Awadh, Bengal and Hyderabad, the new rulers of the Carnatic preserved the trappings of Mughal legitimacy even when they had long since thrown off any real allegiance to their Mughal overlords. Saadatullah Khan and his family were the first of two lines of Muslim military men who sought to rule in the Carnatic under the title of the nawabs or Mughal viceroys of Arcot.

By the 1740s the Tamil country had become a battleground for all the leading military powers of the region including Hyderabad and the Maratha confederacy as well as the French and the British, and each of these powers supported a different claimant to the nawabi. In 1744 the last of the Navaiyat nawabs was murdered at Arcot, and another ruling lineage was installed in their place. These new nawabs, the Walahjahs, came to rule in Arcot as clients of the English East India Company. Although their power and prestige were greatly undermined by their ties to the colonial power, the family survived as titular rulers of Arcot until 1855 when the nawabi itself was abolished and the Walahjahs' domains were absorbed into the Madras Presidency.

The Walahjahs were Urdu-speakers rather than Deccanis and had originated as comparatively humble members of the north Indian service gentry; their ancestral home was the small *casbah* town of Gopaumau in Awadh. Although the new regime continued to attract scholars and service people from the Deccan, the Walahjahs recruited most of their soldiers and literati from the old Mughal heartland regions. This change in lineage thus added yet another wave of Muslim migrants to the mixed population of Deccani gentry, traders, artisans, mercenaries and religious notables who had already been attracted to the Carnatic. Thus while the

<sup>53</sup> Even the usually accurate and perceptive Turnbull says, 'The real Mahomedans are comparatively few [in Tirunelveli] in proportion to the Lubbays, amongst whom the vernacular language of the country prevails.' He means that 'real' Muslims are those of north India or Deccani *ashraf* origin, and that Persian, Urdu or Dakhni are properly Islamic tongues, not the south Indian regional languages. 'Memoir', p. 3.

Tamil country did not have any sustained experience of Muslim conquest before the eighteenth-century, the region did contain substantial numbers of people who identified themselves as Muslims and who wished to associate themselves with traditions of Muslim military and political ascendancy. This gave the region not one but two definitions of élite Muslim rank and status. For the old maraikkayar communities and across much of Tamil society as a whole, superior standing was vested in Muslims who took pride in assertions of pure Arab descent and who combined an ideal of high Islamic purity with a tradition of service and honours derived from non-Muslim kings and warrior chiefs. The region's Dakhni and Urdu-speaking migrants were comparative newcomers who had sought to establish themselves as the equivalent of a north Indian ashraf, as men of standing who could claim ancestral connections to the Persianate courts of the Mughals or the Deccani sultans.

As has already been shown, there was no real gulf dividing Dakhnis and Tamils, élite and so-called 'convert' Muslims. On the contrary, by drawing the Muslim military men into their war-bands and service networks, the region's warrior chiefs helped to create a notion of common ground amongst the different bodies of artisans, traders, soldiers and service people who claimed some form of Muslim affiliation. These groups may not have intermarried but they certainly met and mingled in the poligars' courts, maritime towns and fort-mart centres. They all received support and religious benefactions from their warrior patrons, and such moves helped to create bonds of shared belief and worship in the Tamil country.

The religious system which grew up out of these cross-cutting ties and devotional traditions was exceptionally varied and dynamic. Communal affiliation was still highly fluid at this time, and each wave of penetration and settlement introduced elements of faith and observance which were sometimes greatly at variance with prevailing trends in the society. By the beginning of the eighteenth century south India (and more specifically the Tamil country) contained a large population of professing Muslims and many active religious foundations which functioned as centres of formal Muslim teaching and devotion. Why then was the region never as fully 'Islamised' as Bengal, Java or the Punjab? Why did south Indian Islam develop as an 'indigenised' religious tradition combining networks of cult saint veneration with individual centres of Islamic high culture, when so many other parts of the Muslim world received Islam as a universal or transcendent force affecting the society at large?

In part the answer is to be found in an account of the physical dimensions and growth of the region's Muslim populations. As this chapter has shown, early trading contacts were as important in the Tamil

country as they were on the Malabar coast. The key difference here is that the volume and value of the Coromandel trade were considerably less than that of the Malabar spice trade; it was this which led to the growth of southwestern India's larger Muslim communities. Similarly, groups such as the Bohras, Khojas and Memons were more closely organised for largescale international trade and replicated the organisation of the tightly knit Gujarati Hindu mercantile castes; they also had considerable influence on local rulers.<sup>54</sup> By contrast the Tamil maraikkayars were a much smaller and more diffuse population. For all their prestige and prosperity they never secured the same tight grip on the seaborne export trade of southeastern India; in the Tamil hinterland Muslim trading was carried out by large numbers of petty traders with relatively little support from the region's agricultural communities.

In eastern India the growth of Muslim communities was associated with the rise of Muslim political power in Bengal during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and with the expansion of the rise frontier in areas where adhesion to Islam went hand in hand with the sedentarisation of pastoral and 'tribal' peoples and the transmission of new agrarian techniques.<sup>55</sup> Despite the establishment of a so-called 'sultanate' in the Tamil country at about the same time, there was no substantial Muslim polity in south India until the eighteenth century; new cultivation and settlement were not pressed forward under the aegis of Muslim rulers as was the case in Bengal. Equally while Vijayanagar and nayaka rule did initiate a major change in agricultural production in the Tamil country, the warrior groups and black-soil cultivators who helped to expand the region's agrarian frontier rarely identified themselves as formally professing Muslims. In the Tamil country Islam was transformed and absorbed by such people rather than 'converting' or transforming them.

But an account of material conditions can provide only a very limited insight into the penetration of Islam in southern India. The extent of a given region's 'Islamisation' was also dependent on the local religious traditions which the bearers of formal scriptural Islam were obliged to challenge, mould or assimilate. So what was the pre-existing pattern of faith and worship in south India at the time when the new Muslim communities were being established? Tamilnad did not possess an overarching tradition of transcendent political and religious authority like that of Java, Ceylon and the other the Buddhist and Hindu-Buddhist domains of south and southeast Asia. The Cholas and Pandyas were not universal kings (*cakravartins*) matched by universal world-renouncing

<sup>54</sup> Christine Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India. Politics and Communities in Bombay City 1840-1885* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 4-26.

<sup>55</sup> R.M. Eaton, 'Islam in Bengal', p. 26.

religious powers, and the 'segmentary' kingdoms which they and their successors ruled contained no ready-made framework for the bearers of an incoming universalistic faith. Elsewhere in Asia the politics of the cakravartins with their claims of universal kingship and associated Buddhist *sanghas* or monastic assemblies provided a paradigm of transcendent authority for their subjects. This may have paved the way for the reception of Muslim religious specialists, particularly the jurists or *ulama* whose attachments were outside and above that of the local chieftdom and the local society, and who might therefore be compared with the Buddhist sanghas of Thailand and the Indonesian archipelago kingdoms.<sup>56</sup>

As the next chapter will show, Islam was 'successful' in implanting itself into many discrete individual settings in south India, but it did not make the same leap to an overarching form of power and worship, and showed no signs of doing so until the emergence of an authentic (if ultimately abortive) south Indian Muslim state in the eighteenth-century. Thus we now turn to the local forms of worship which were created by the explosive meeting of Tamil power deities and the Muslim warrior frontier.

<sup>56</sup> See S.J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer. A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 32–53, 102–225. The role of the *ulama* within the newly 'Islamising' court centres of southeast Asia has been related to the presence of the Buddhist sanghas in these societies. In 'Cultural encounter and formation of tradition: Islam in Indonesia' (paper presented to the fourth Conference of the Cambridge–Delhi–Leiden–Yogyakarta Comparative Study of India and Indonesia, Cambridge, 1987) Taufik Abdullah shows that the expansion of Islam into the archipelago may have been advanced by the existence of a pre-existing group of 'transcendent' religious specialists.

## *The Muslim religious tradition in south India*

### Introduction

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 will look at the impact of eighteenth-century Muslim rulers and would-be rulers on south India's religious life. First, though, we must ask what kind of Muslim religious tradition had come into being in the Tamil country before the founding of the new Arcot regime. Although most of the region's Muslim groups took pride in the tradition of Islamic high culture which was fostered in the maraikkayar towns, this world of self-conscious Muslim adherence must be understood in terms of its close and mutually invigorating relationship with the pir cults of Tamilnad, and with the networks of pilgrimage and cult veneration which formed around the region's tomb shrines. In towns such as Kilakkarai and Kayalpatanam, for example, the devotees and pirzadas of the great Sufi dargahs and khanaqahs moved easily between the world of 'high' Islam and the supposedly humble 'folk' tradition of the unlettered Muslim 'masses'. It is only in the most superficial sense that these constituted opposing levels of religious experience. Most of the region's major Sufi hospices and teaching institutions grew into celebrated cult centres and sites of miraculous healing and ecstatic devotional practice, while simultaneously acquiring fame as places of learning and instruction.

The aim of this chapter is to create a typology of south Indian Sufi cults and devotional traditions. This will be done in two ways: first, by grouping the region's cult personalities as figures in a specifically Muslim sacred landscape, and secondly, by showing how south India's Muslim cult traditions came to allude to and intersect with forms of Tamil faith and worship, that is, with forms of worship which would now be termed Hindu.

The richness of the region's Muslim religious landscape is conveyed in the large number of locally-produced pilgrimage manuals, biographical texts, devotional poems and descriptive listings of shrines and holy places which are still being produced in the larger Muslim population centres. South Indian scholar-devotees have been compiling these texts for many centuries, and the tradition of Sufi writing is still particularly lively in localities such as Madras, Trichy, Nagore, Vellore and Kayalpatanam. In

these centres local Muslims take pride in the productivity of their resident literary men, and in the range and vitality of their communities' specialist booksellers and publishing houses. Many of the larger Sufi foundations have built up collections of tazkiras (biographies) and devotional texts dating back over many centuries, and many of their pirzada or guardian families are continuing to write or commission shrine histories and tazkiras combining accounts of the shrines' recent history with material from the institution's older biographies and *malfuzat* literature.<sup>1</sup>

Many Tamil tomb shrines are located in isolated rural settings, but the importance of the region's urban shrines can be seen in the most detailed of the south Indian pilgrimage chronicles, the *Bahar-i-A'zam Jahi*. This work, which is one of the best available sources on south Indian Muslim religious life in the nawabi period, was composed by the Walahjah court *literateur* Ghulam Abdu'l Qadir. Its aim was to record the great state pilgrimage to Nagore which was undertaken in 1823 by Azam Jah Bahadur Walahjah IV (nawab of Arcot 1820–5). Visits to urban dargahs formed the major set-piece scenes of devotion in the course of the pilgrimage. The *Bahar* volume lists over thirty tomb sites in the town of Trichy, thirty-three in Arcot and thirty in Vellore. Another ninety-two Sufi shrines are mentioned in the work. Thus as of the 1820s there were at least 185 dargahs and Sufi tomb sites to be found along the nawab's 400-mile pilgrimage route from Madras to Nagore along the coast, and then back to Madras by way of Trichy, Arcot and Vellore. (The pilgrimage will be described in greater detail in chapter 6.) Today there are probably five or six hundred active pir shrines in the Tamil country and southern Andhra Pradesh. The maraikkayar port of 'Mahmud Bandar', (also known by its Portuguese colonial name Porto Novo) still contains at least twenty active dargahs, and there are similar clusters of tomb shrines in centres such as Kayalpatanam, Kilakkarai, Killai, Vellore, Salem and Karaikkal, and in the major cities of Tamilnad – Madras, Madurai and Trichy in particular.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Many specialist Madras Muslim publishers and booksellers are located near the Walahjah mosque and in Angappanayaka Street in Georgetown; Nagore, Trichy and Vellore also have publishing houses producing works in Tamil, Arabic–Tamil, Urdu and Persian. The tazkiras and shrine histories published by the region's shrine authorities relate individual pirs to broader networks of cult devotion, providing a picture of the region's overall religious landscape. There are also general works which describe shrines and holy places across a wide expanse of territory. One of the most extensive of these is the *Bahar-i-A'zam Jahi* of Ghulam Abdu'l Qadir Nazir. Turnbull too described many Muslim holy places in the 'Geographical and Statistical Memoir'.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'active' refers to dargahs currently receiving devotees. Modern works which give a panoramic treatment of the region's sacred geography include H. Suharwardy, 'The life and works of the past Muslim Sufis of Tamilnad with special reference to Urdu language' (unpublished typescript, n.d.) and J.M. Sali, *Tamilakattu Tarkakkal* ('Tamil

### A typology of Muslim cults

How else can these sites be classed and analysed? As in many other parts of the Muslim world, the different types of individuals who provide the focus for these south Indian *ta'fās* (saint cults) reveal a great deal about the way in which the region's Muslims understand their own historical past. The first category which can be identified here is made up of devotional traditions which focus on biblical figures, particularly on characters from the Old Testament. Many of these individuals are mentioned in the Quran, and across the Muslim world it is common to find powerful regional holy places which are revered as the grave sites of prophets and heroes from the Bible. Most of these shrines have come to acquire all the lore and trappings of conventional dargahs, and this has served to create a kind of Muslim pre-history for Asian and African believers. Figures such as Adam, Daniel, Solomon (known to Muslims as Sulaiman) and even Jesus and the Virgin Mary (Nabi Iesu and Bibi Miriam) have been incorporated into the Muslim's calendar of *nabis*, a term used to describe those superhuman beings who were allowed to receive a measure of divine revelation in the centuries preceding the final and ultimate revelation bestowed upon the Prophet Muhammad.

Many Tamils maintain that the Biblical Adam fell to earth somewhere in Ceylon (Sarandib) after being cast out of Paradise: the path he later took from Ceylon to India is said to be marked by the chain of islands off the Tamil coast which is known as Adam's Bridge. The Sri Lankan mountain called Adam's Peak has similar sacred associations for south Asian Muslims. Pilgrims revere a hollowed-out rock which is hailed as the nabi's footprint; to other devotees it is the footprint of the Buddha or the divine Rama. Among Muslims the Nabi Adam tradition has been a means of breaking down the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' or 'purist' and 'folk' Islam. The most typical of south India's Sufis are those who are seen to move readily between these varied realms of religious experience. At Panaikkulam on the Ramnad coast there are six dargahs, one of which is the shrine of a twentieth-century Tamil Sufi named Saiyid Muhammad Alim Bava (d. 1963). As in the case of Takya Sahib of Kilakkarai (see above, p. 84) this saint's biographers identify him as both Sufi and alim, an expert in the interpretation and application of Quranic law. (The two roles may be seen as complementary, despite claims by some rigorous

Dargahs') (Madras, 1981). These accounts are based on earlier shrine histories and tazkiras, and on oral traditions recounted by the pirzada families who control these shrines. Suharwardy's work describes over 100 shrines in Tamilnad, with greatest coverage for Tanjore, Trichy and south Arcot districts and the area around Madras city. Sali covers 116 dargahs in Trichy, Tanjore and Ramnad.

'purists' that Sufism devalues the sharia.) To the saint's devotees this scriptural expertise is entirely compatible with his powers as a miracle worker. Saiyid Muhammad is remembered as a rainmaker and healer who had the power to conjure up of handfuls of dates for his circle of devotee-disciples: the fruits were endowed with magical curative properties. The most celebrated event of his career is said to have occurred when the saint was *en route* to Mecca for the haj. In the prosaic surroundings of Jiddah airport he is said to have received a gift of two coins from a mysterious traveller who was then revealed to have been the Nabi Adam. As will be seen below, in all the regions where Indian Muslim states were founded, the ceremonial gifting of coins came to be seen as an act expressing relationships of fealty and overlordship. This could involve kings and their subjects as well as pirs and their murids (disciples).<sup>3</sup>

In south India the sites where Muslims came to venerate these nabi-pir figures were almost always bound up in a sacred landscape incorporating shrines which have now come to be thought of as Hindu, Muslim or Christian, but which have shared many features at the level of practical observance and cult traditions. Near the famous Hindu holy place of Ramesveram, for example, there is a grave in which Cain is said to have buried Abel and where he himself was later buried at the end of his penitential wanderings: this has been a much-frequented Muslim pilgrimage place for many centuries. (It is at Ramesvaram that the route known as Adam's Bridge has its terminus point. This island chain is also revered as the holy *setu*, Lord Rama's land bridge to the island of Lanka.)<sup>4</sup>

Sites of this kind are sometimes located inside Hindu temples. At Silambar near Chidambaram there is a temple to the Saivite deity Sri Murukan which came to be known as the site of the *gaddi* (throne) of the prophet Sulaiman (the Biblical Solomon). According to a tradition which dates back at least to the eighteenth century, the throne was miraculously transported from Jerusalem, and many Muslims, including courtiers of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century nawabs of Arcot, were willing to

<sup>3</sup> Sali, *Tamilakattu Tarkakkal*, pp. 209–11. In the Quran Adam is the first of the Prophets and *khalifa ul akbar*, 'inheritor of power'. Ceylon is also reputed to contain Adam's burial place: Muslims have probably been frequenting these sites since the tenth century AD. See Stanley, ed., *Duarte Barbosa*, pp. 170–1; Balfour, *Cyclopaedia*, I, p. A-26; III, p. H-548; James Emerson Tennant, *Ceylon. An Account of the Island Physical, Historical and Topographical* (2 vols., London, 1859) II, pp. 132–41; Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, pp. 258–60. In another legend a Hindu Pandya raja is converted to Islam by a party of Muslim 'dervishes' undertaking a pilgrimage to Adam's Peak. (Tennant, *Ceylon*, II, p. 136, note 4.) This tradition emphasises themes of dominion and sovereignty in relation to the role of the Sufi and the creation of a south Asian Muslim community. Adam establishes a primeval Muslim kingship over the whole world which is fulfilled by south Asia's indigenous kings and rajas. See below, pp. 183–6.

<sup>4</sup> Vanamamalai Pillai, *Temples of the Setu*, p. 5.

enter the temple in order to pay homage to the Sulaiman gaddi. Sulaiman himself has been venerated by Deccani and south Indian Muslims as a divinely empowered hero-king from the age of the prophets. He figures as a point of reference in the cult myths of some of the most widely venerated pirs in south India: in the biographical texts such pirs are said to have been 'present at the throne of Sulaiman' at some point in the course of their miraculous careers.<sup>5</sup> The idea here is that by means of a supernatural chain of affiliation and fealty, these saints were able to establish themselves as subjects and devotee-disciples of Sulaiman the king and master murshid. Such a claim would naturally enhance the power and status of the king's chosen subject-pir.

This concentration on the theme of kingship and dominion is even more pronounced in the second category of Muslim cult traditions to be found in the Tamil country. Rather than singling out prophets and heroes from the early days of creation, these tai'fas have been built up around the personalities of kings and warriors from more accessible historical eras. Of these royal conqueror beings, the figure of Sikandar or Iskandar is one of the most widely revered. The cult of Sikandar is based on the historical figure of Alexander the Great whose conquests are still commemorated in folk tales and legends across much of the Muslim world. In many parts of Asia, Sikandar is regarded as yet another honourary Muslim, and more specifically as a forebear of the kings and heroes who will go on to found actual Muslim dominions in the centuries following the final revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. These traditions therefore carry on from the cults of the biblical nabis. Having charted a Muslim pre-history which dates back to the genesis of mankind, this second set of personalities forms the next link in an historical chain which will carry the Muslim experience forward to the time of the Prophet's revelation and then onward to the present day.

The tradition of Sikandar the precursor king is extremely strong in Tamilnad, and the great Hindu temple centre of Madurai has a long-standing association with the Sikandar tradition. As in the north the cult has a strong martial flavour and has also been notable for combining Hindu and Islamic elements. By the early eighteenth century, Sikandar

<sup>5</sup> 'History of Sultan Syed Babur Takuruddin [transcription error: should read Fakuruddin] at Pennakonda'. [dated Dec. 1804] Unbound Translations: Class 1 – Persian/Mackenzie Collection/IOL, p. 20. (Alternative title: 'The Miracles of [Sultan Saiyid] Babar Fukruddeen Hoossainee'.) See also *Bahar*, p. 18; Ja'far Sharif, *Islam in India or the Qanun-i-Islam. The Customs of the Musulmans of India*, ed. William Crooke, trans. G.A. Herklots (Oxford, 1921; original edn 1832), p. 229; Burhan Ibn Hasan, *Tuzak-i-Walahjahi*, II, *From the Battle of Ambur 1162 AH to the Capture of Pondicherry, 1174 AH (1749–1761 AD)* (Trans. S. Muhammad Husayn Najjar (Madras, 1939), p. 244. (Hereafter referred to as *Tuzak*, II.)

the warrior hero had come to be widely identified with the martial clan deity Skanda (Murukan/Subramanya). His shrines, most of which are situated on elevated crags or rocky outcrops, featured terracotta images in the shape of mounted warriors: these closely resemble Tamil cult images of the horseman deity Ayyanar.<sup>6</sup>

Through the next two sets of cult traditions, the charting of Muslim historical experience has been brought forward into the age which begins with the coming of the Prophet Muhammad and the formal creation of the *umma*, the universal community of Muslim believers. Despite its supposed remoteness from the west Asian 'heartland' of Islam, south India contains many pir shrines which proclaim a link with this earliest phase of formal Muslim community-building. The most important of these are located in the coastal maraikkayar town of Mahmud Bandar (Porto Novo) where several of the locality's twenty dargahs are said to contain the remains of *sahabi*, actual companions or contemporaries of the Prophet.<sup>7</sup>

It is impossible to say whether there really were *sahabi* who lived and died in south India, but the next body of Muslim *tai'fas* begins to move the south Indian pir cult landscape into the period of verifiable historical experience. Once again, as in the case of the Sikandar tradition, this fourth set of cult traditions emphasises motifs of invasion and armed conquest. It has been noted that the south experienced two brief episodes of Muslim military penetration during the fourteenth-century. The first of these was in 1310–11 when the Delhi sultan Alauddin Khalji despatched a tribute-taking expedition to the Hoysala and Pandya domains of south India: its commander Malik Kafur is supposed to have plundered innumerable Hindu temples throughout Karnataka and Tamilnad. Then in 1334 a line of Muslim military adventurers owing nominal allegiance to the Delhi sultans founded a short-lived chiefdom (the so-called Madurai sultanate) which they ruled from the ancient Tamil Pandya capital of Madurai.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary poems and temple inscriptions refer to these two

<sup>6</sup> Sikandar is still a powerful cult figure in Madurai. See glossary entry on the Sikandar shrine at Tirupparankunram in Madurai, in BOR vol. 3562/1803/pp. 242–5/TNA and Baliga, *Madurai*, p. 404. See also F.W. Clothey, 'Pilgrimage centers in the Tamil cultus of Murukan', in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40:1 (1972), pp. 79–95; Ja'far Sharif, *Islam in India*, pp. 139–40, note 2.

<sup>7</sup> Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', p. 37. For other localities containing 'sahabi' shrines, see e.g. *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> W. Haig, ed., *The Cambridge History of India*, III (Delhi, 1958), pp. 112–16, 148–50; Krishnaswami Aiyangar, *South India and Her Muhammadan Invaders*; Baliga, *Madurai*, p. 41–6; K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Pandyan Kingdom. From the Earliest Times to the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1929), pp. 201–14, 235–44.

episodes as the *tulukarkarakam*, the time of the northerners' wars or invasions, when shrines were sacked, towns and villages were laid waste and 'the Tambraparni [flowed] red with the blood of slaughtered cows'.<sup>9</sup> Over the next five or six centuries Hindus in Karnataka and Tamilnad built up a body of oral tradition which has turned this record of invasion and conquest into a blood-drenched folk epic. Given the strong imprint of these episodes, it is not surprising that there are many Muslim shrines in the south which are reputed to be the burial places of fourteenth-century 'tulukkar' warriors and conquerors. Madurai features as one of the most important centres for dargahs of this sort. The city and its surrounding hinterland contain several cult shrines which are said to contain the remains of 'kings' and generals from the time of the Madurai sultanate, and there are similar sites in Ramnad and a number of other poligar regions.<sup>10</sup>

The fifth category of tai'fa traditions contains a wider range of personalities than the four others which have been looked at thus far. This group includes all the south Indian cult figures who possess the attributes of the conventional south Asian Sufi. They all have substantial biographical sources which suggest precise dates of origin for individual shrines and cults, and they have all been portrayed as men of learning and advanced mystical attainments whose persons and places of residence became imbued with an endowment of sacred miraculous barakat. At the same time their biographies endow them with many of the same qualities which characterise the other categories of cult saints: there has been a continual process of overlapping and interpenetration amongst them all.

Some of the saints in this fifth category are held to have migrated to India at quite an early point in the evolution of the institutionalised Sufi tradition. There is a dargah in Tirunelveli, for example, where the cult saint Saiyid Jamaluddin is identified as a thirteenth-century Sufi master sent to India by the Mamluk sultans of Egypt.<sup>11</sup> Port towns such as Kottar and Muttupet as well as hinterland localities such as Trichy and Madurai also have cult saints who are supposed to date from the thirteenth century.<sup>12</sup> All these may be more recent foundations. Cult shrines often possess several contradictory traditions of origin; in some cases the *pirzadas* (hereditary trustees or guardians) have created a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century date of foundation in order to link their shrine to one

<sup>9</sup> Nilakanta Sastri, *The Pandyan Kingdom*, pp. 242–3.

<sup>10</sup> Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', pp. 58–9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55, 63; Sali, *Tamilakattu Tarkakkal*, p. 85.

of the great founder figures of Sufism such as Jala al-din Rumi and Ibn al-Arabi.<sup>13</sup>

In fact though, most of the cult saints in this group are portrayed as figures of the last 500 years or so. These are the pirs whose devotees have built up a particularly elaborate body of tazkiras and other textual lore. The great pioneer in this field is Richard Eaton. His study of the political and social roles of Sufis in mediaeval Bijapur makes use of hitherto untouched Deccani tazkiras (biographical texts) as well as vernacular devotional songs, legends and 'folk' tales.<sup>14</sup> Although the far south did not generate the great wealth of early texts which Eaton found in the Deccan, there is enough oral and written source material in the Tamil country to suggest definite dates and places of origin for at least some of the region's cult saints. These sources show that many of the region's historical Sufis were adepts from the Deccan who fled to Tamilnad following the collapse of the Deccani sultanates. One such figure is Khawja Ahmad Shah Husayni Chishti who is buried in one of the Trichy dargahs and who is said to have been related to the mediaeval Deccani sultans of Bedar. As is customary in Sufi biographies, the sources provide an account of the saint's acceptance by his chosen murid, an act which serves to incorporate him into a local network of sanctity and affiliation. In this case Khawja Ahmad Shah is said to have sat for twelve years in trance-like meditation before the tomb of another Trichy saint, the great Tamil pir Nathar Wali whose cult will be described below. At last a flower drops into his lap from one of the garlands adorning the tomb: the Sufi takes this as a sign of acceptance and endorsement from his deceased murid and goes off to found a khanaqah (Sufi hospice) of his own nearby.<sup>15</sup>

Another popular Tamil Muslim saint with a Deccani origin is Hazarat Hamid Shah Awliya whose dargah is located in the ancient Hindu temple town of Kanchipuram (Conjeeveram). This saint is said to have been a Sufi who migrated from Bijapur in 1674–5. Like many other Tamil tai'fas the cult of Hamid Shah Awliya has become closely linked with traditions of formal Hindu devotion and pilgrimage. One of the miracles (*karāmat*) which the biographies attribute to the saint is the freeing of the temple's great processional chariot (*ter*) which had been mysteriously immobilised at the start of the town's great annual utsavam festival. This is a striking example of the way in which many such sources have come to portray

<sup>13</sup> Dargahs of uncertain date also gain status by claiming links with Muin al-din Chishti of Ajmer (AD 1142–1236) the founder of the first organised Indian Sufi order. Such claims may be debatable, but they do show that south Indian Muslims see themselves as people of venerable lineage.

<sup>14</sup> *Sufis of Bijapur*, e.g. pp. xvii–xx, 19–79, 243–306.

<sup>15</sup> Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', pp. 21–2.

Muslim cult saints as sponsors or protectors of Hindu holy places. According to these Muslim texts, the Kanchipuram dargah even allows the local temple authorities to show their gratitude for the saint's patronage by allocating him a share of the temple's sanctified *prasatam* offerings. This is described in the texts as a mark of favour and respect and certainly not as an impertinence from local 'kaffirs'.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to these saints from the Deccan and the Arab world, the biographies and oral accounts cite almost every other possible place of origin for the Sufis of Tamilnad including central Asia, Persia, Turkey and most areas of the Indian subcontinent. Whether they are real or merely ascribed to the saint as part of his legendary tradition, all these diverse origins show that there was nothing 'parochial' about the religious culture of south India. Certainly this was not a purely regional tradition of worship, if 'regional' is taken to mean that the Tamilnad Muslims were isolated from the wider Muslim world and were untouched by the great networks and personalities of organised *tariqa* Sufism.

There are also Muslims of local Tamilian origin who have achieved cult status amongst south Indian devotees. Many of these cult saints are known to their devotees and *pirzadas* (shrine guardians) as men of learning and elite literary attainment, but in their biographical traditions elements of the 'Islamic' and the 'un-Islamic' mix and intermingle without any sign of unease amongst their devotees and biographers. In the temple and fortress town of Trichy for example, a *pir* cult has evolved around an eighteenth-century Sufi master named Shah Alimullah Qadiriyya (d. 1788–9; dargah founded 1796–7). The *Bahar* volume indicates that this saint was widely perceived as a *mazdhub*, but he has also come to be revered for his attainments as a scholar and literary man: his Urdu devotional poetry is still widely read in south India. At the same time he has long been portrayed as a *pir* whose miracles or *karamat* possessed a decidedly martial flavour. The biographical works describe his ability to fend off sword blows without apparent effort, and it is said that 'even in his old age he could beat a wrestler by means of his inward strength and make him roll along like a stone from the hilltop'. This same account also employs one of the most striking pieces of imagery used of any Tamil cult saint. In an image drawn unmistakably from the Hindu Vaishnavite tradition, the saint is described as a figure lying in a deep sleep while a great cobra spreads its hood above his head.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64–5. Hazarat Khawja Saiyid Moosa Shah Qadiri, the Madras saint whose dargah is located in the middle of the city's main Mount Road shopping area, is also said to have come from Bijapur. *Ibid.*, pp. 71–2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20. This saint is also known as Hazarat Shams Paran. The *Bahar* says that 'his miracles had the strength to reach the sun, hence he became well known as Shams Paran' (*Bahar*, p. 57). The capacity to perform miracles (*karamat*) is accepted as one of the defining characteristics of the true *pir*.

The significance of this Vaishnavite motif will be discussed below: what should be seen here is that this sword-wielding poet–saint was a figure whose intellectual accomplishments could overlap and intermingle with his powers as a miracle-working cult pir. There are also many Sufi literati from the maraikkayar towns who have come to be revered as cult saints. These Tamil scholar–mystics and their tombs have long been held to be endowed with miraculous powers just like those of the region’s other cult personalities. The biographies of Shaikh Abdul Qadir of Kayalpatanam record a whole series of karamat performed by this distinguished literary Sufi, including the working of a miraculous cure for a courtier of the raja of Travancore who had contracted leprosy. Of Abdul Qadir’s father Shaikh Umar it was said,

Even in [a] state of trance, he did not forget the duty of offering his daily obligatory prayers. Due to the intensive and continued exercises in meditation and recitation of prayers, he attained certain supernatural powers through which he could get the people cured of their abnormal diseases.<sup>18</sup>

Both of these Sufis exemplify the complex and multi-faceted relationship between ‘high’ and ‘folk’ traditions of Muslim belief, and between so-called ‘purist’ and ‘syncretic’ Islamic identities. Shaikh Umar is thought of as a pir whose reputation for austere and rigorous Islamic practice actually worked to enhance his endowment of miraculous barakat (power). Shaikh Abdul Qadir held many of the views which are usually associated with uncompromising Islamic fundamentalism. He condemned ‘innovation’ in religious observance; he ‘bitterly criticised the people of Malabar’ (the Mappillas or Malayali Muslims) for adopting the matrilineal inheritance system which was used by many Malayali Hindu groups, and when British suzerainty was established in Malabar he denounced ‘their [the Mappilas’] submission to the “cleanshaved” Christian overlords’. Yet this seemingly ‘purist’ Sufi paid frequent visits to the major cult shrines of Tamilnad and was known as a fervent devotee of the great Nagore pir Shahul Hamid Naguri.<sup>19</sup> Shaikh Abdul Qadir was thus one of the many south Indians who would have seen themselves as strict observant Muslims but could still identify with both ends of a wide spectrum of Muslim religious experience. In this respect Abdul Qadir was typical of the great majority of the region’s Sufi personalities: he was a man of prestige and learning; he was connected with the region’s great cult networks, and both facets of his identity contributed to his status as a cult pir.

<sup>18</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, p. 454.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 461.

This intermingling of popular devotional worship with the traditions of Islamic high culture has not been unique to Tamilnad. In Bijapur, many Sufi foundations which functioned initially as centres of organised tariqa Sufism were transformed over the centuries into shrines where the *pirzadas* dispense charms and amulets to great crowds of Muslim and Hindu suppliants.<sup>20</sup> This is not to be taken as a sign of degeneration or enfeeblement: what really occurred was a process of strengthening and mutual invigoration as cult beliefs came to overlap with the shrines' traditions of learning and Sufi preceptorship. Nor must there be a long time lag between the rise of an institutionalised Sufi teaching centre, and its emergence as a popular cult shrine. This can be seen for example in the case of the eighteenth-century Arcot Sufi Uthuman Khan Sarwar. According to the Walahjah chronicler Ghulam Abdul Qadir Nazir, this saint was an accomplished Urdu poet and scholar; he was recognised as a formally affiliated Qadiriyya Sufi and was 'very pious, devout and a fighter for the Faith'. Within his lifetime he also acted as a dispenser of miraculous cures and tokens, and this continued to be one of the key functions of his *khanqah* (hospice) after Uthuman's death. These highly practical signs of the saint's power were not seen as being incompatible with his status as a pious scholar and 'mainstream' tariqa Sufi. Ghulam states,

The reason for his fame is that he cured the father of the author of this book from acute dysentery by writing out three *naqsh* [amulets in the form of pictures or diagrams] which were washed in water and taken in [swallowed] three times. The patient was completely restored to health.<sup>21</sup>

A similar blurring of categories can be seen in the case of the eminent Qadiri mystic Saiyyid Ruknuddin Muhammad Shah Abdul Hassan Qurbi (1706/7 – 1768/9) who founded the celebrated Vellore Sufi teaching foundation which is known as the Hazarat Makan. (The name means abode of the Hazarat, i.e. the one learned in Scripture.) This saint's *dargah* stands at the centre of the *madrassa* (teaching foundation) compound and is renowned as a powerful source of miracle-working *barakat*. The many biographies of Qurbi place great emphasis on his scholarship and literary attainments. At the same time, though, they are at pains to point out that he possessed all the attributes of a conventional *pir*, including the *pir*'s capacity to perform *karamat* or miracles. Many of these *karamat* are described in his biographies. According to the texts, Qurbi healed the sick by breathing on them and caused malefactors to go

<sup>20</sup> Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, pp. 290–6.

<sup>21</sup> *Bahar*, p. 118. Ghulam's chronicle takes note of many other living *pirs* and *mazdhubs* along the *nawab's* route to Nagore: see *ibid.*, pp. 24, 81, 139.

mad and to be consumed by flames. These miracles, his biographers declare, represent 'neither an enchantment nor stratagem nor artifice nor jugglery nor legerdemain, nor any hocus-pocus; but a reality, and a proof that the person at whose hands these supernatural effects are produced is favoured and great in the eyes of God'.<sup>22</sup>

These and hundreds of other divinely endowed cult saints are still objects of ardent veneration in south India. New pirs continued to be added to the pantheon throughout the nineteenth century, and even today the tradition is as lively and expansive as it was in the pre-colonial period. Itinerant 'faqirs' still tour the region, mazdhubs still perform feats of mental and bodily discipline, and the powers of the region's living saints, pirs and deceased Sufi masters are still a palpable force at the region's cult sites. Throughout the south new dargahs are still being founded and endowed by pious Tamil and Dakhni worshippers. As in past centuries, many of these benefactions come from professing Hindus: in Madurai, for example, the dargah of an Arab pir known as Hazarat Tahurullah Shah Qadiri (d. 1942) was recently built by the Brahman proprietor of one of the town's local bus companies; the shrine is located inside the bus stand compound.<sup>23</sup> Recorded hymns in praise of the great pirs blast out from urban loudspeakers – the Nagore saint's praise songs are as ubiquitous as Tamil film music – and the dargahs of Trichy, Nagore, Madras and many smaller centres are resplendent with the signs of lavish donation and embellishment.

### **Muslim cult saints and the Hindu sacred landscape**

Thus far what has been described in this chapter are five overlapping categories of south Indian pir cults which have been grouped according to an exclusively Islamic typology of Sufi saints and shrines. This section will show how these traditions relate to a formally Hindu religious landscape (that is, to a terrain containing shrines, deities and temples which would now be described as Hindu). The major difference between this view of the pir and the conventional Muslim scheme which has already been described is that in this second set of categories there is relatively little concern with themes of historical development within the wider Muslim world, or within the south Indian domains in which this regional Muslim culture was coming to be formed. Instead of relating the devotee to the

<sup>22</sup> From a tazkira by Qurbī's son Hazarat Maulvi Saiyid Shah Abdul Lateef Qadiri Zauqi (1738/9–1780/1); Zauqi too was a distinguished Vellore scholar-Sufi. 'Hazarat Sayyed Shah Abdul Latheef Qadiri Bijapuri' (typescript in Hazarat Makan Library, Vellore), p. 24. See also Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', p. 48–50.

<sup>23</sup> Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', p. 57.

various stages of Muslim history and pre-history, the cult traditions to be looked at here have come to focus on motifs and episodes which invest the region's pirs with attributes of Hindu divine power.

This is not to say that these cults are to be thought of as nothing more than a disguised form of Hinduism. All the same there are aspects of south Indian divinity to which the pir has come to be assimilated in the minds of many devotees. In some cases this assimilation may take the form of a positive congruence of attributes which the pir is seen to hold in common with one of the deities; at other times it may take place as an apparent conflict in which the pir conquers the non-Muslim deity by outclassing his or her powers. All this has come about because there are features of Tamil religion which have made it particularly easy for devotees to bridge the gap between the south Indian deity and the south Indian Muslim cult saint, and those who have been able to make this leap include worshippers who would now be classed as formally professing Muslims. There are three main groupings here: first, elements of these cult traditions which link the pir to the Saivite devotional tradition; secondly, those which relate him to the conventions of theistic Vaishnavism; and lastly, those which link the pir to the Tamil amman or goddess tradition.

In one way or another most of the key figures of the Islamic historical pantheon have acquired an identification with the gods and goddesses of south India. The Madurai Sikandar cult with its links to the worship of Skanda/Subrahmanya and the warrior hero Aiyanar, and the cult of the eighteenth-century Trichy saint Shah Alimullah Qadiriyya with its unmistakable Vaishnavite motifs, are only two of many such examples. Here though many of the most powerful saints to be discussed are those who belong to the unorganised or non-institutional Sufi tradition – the qalandars, mazdhubs and forest ascetic pirs of south India. By the beginning of the eighteenth-century, and probably from a very much earlier point, one of the most celebrated of all south Indian cult pirs was a saint who has come to be known variously as Hazarat Nathar Wali, Nathar Wali Tabl-i Alam Padshah, Sultan Saiyid Baba-i Sarmast Tabl-i Alam, or simply as Hazarat Nathar Shah. The Nathar Wali dargah in Trichy is regarded as an exceptionally potent repository of barakat. Nathar Wali has long been a figure of great power in the Tamil country, and at some point in the pre-colonial period the cult had become one of the many regional devotional traditions which transcended formal boundaries between Tamils and Dakhnis, coastal and hinterland people, traders and cultivators, and practitioners of 'standard' and 'folk' Islam. The saint's devotees came from nearly every social and ethnic group in the region and included powerful service people from the Walajah court – the nawabs themselves were leading patrons of the shrine – as

well as humble Tamil cultivators and fishermen.<sup>24</sup> Even more importantly, Nathar Wali was one of the many Tamil power figures who transcended distinctions of Muslim and non-Muslim adherence. Even today his cult attracts 'orthodox' Chettiar bazaar merchants as well as Hindu cultivators and artisans from localities all over southern and central Tamilnad.

Like the legendary nine *walis* of Java, this saint is often portrayed as the Sufi who first brought Muslim teachings to south India. This need not be taken literally: the coming of Islam to Tamilnad was a gradual and complex process and cannot be ascribed to one individual. But while Nathar Wali may actually be a wholly mythical figure, the claim is still important as a reflection of the cult's centrality in Tamil Muslim religious life, and of its role in disseminating a knowledge of Islam across the wider society.

Whether or not the cult is based on a real living personage, it has generated a particularly rich body of biographical source material, and these texts can be used to build up a detailed picture of the Nathar Wali *tai'fa* as a living religious system. Most of these biographies and oral traditions portray the saint as a figure of the thirteenth-century. In some accounts he is a nobleman from Rum (Turkey) or Syria; in at least one biographical text he is, anachronistically, 'the sultan of Istanbul' who renounces his throne in order to follow the Sufi path. Always he comes from abroad accompanied by 900 devoted followers; his journey to India is prompted by a dream in which he is commanded to spread the word of God in distant lands. Again this is a claim which may simply mean that his chroniclers and the *pirzadas* of the Trichy dargah wish to associate the saint with the great figures of west Asian and Indian mediaeval Sufism. Even so these identifications are important as examples of themes which figure very widely in south Indian Sufi biographies: these include the assertion of royal or aristocratic birth and also the claim of origin in one of the Islamic lands of the middle east or central Asia.

Of the many biographies, devotional poems and other accounts of Hazarat Nathar Wali which have been produced in south India, one of the most valuable is a Tamil work called the '*Tōllāyiram (900) Vitaikal Kōnda Orē Oru Mātulampazham*' ('Nine Hundred Seeds, one Pomegranate': this is a metaphorical reference to the *pir* and his 900 disciples.)

<sup>24</sup> These benefactions made the dargah one of south India's wealthiest Sufi foundation; throughout the nineteenth century its hereditary guardians (*pirzadas*) fought bitterly over control of the shrine's resources. See Collec. to BOR, 15 July 1841/BOR vol. 1762/26 July 1841/46-7/p. 9123/TNA; BOR vol. 1898/8 Jan. 1844/31-2/pp. 693-6/TNA; Petition of 1811 from *sajjada-nishin* (hereditary head of dargah) cited in BOR vol. 559/33-4/30 Dec. 1811/99. 12555-9/TNA.

Although this is a relatively modern volume, the text incorporates earlier *tazkira* literature, as well as traditions drawn from written and oral material which certainly existed at the end of the eighteenth century, and probably much earlier.<sup>25</sup>

The *Tollayiram Vitaikal* volume contains all the elements of a standard Sufi biography. These include descriptions of the saint's family background and the auspicious circumstances surrounding his birth, as well as accounts of his childhood and education and the epic travels which culminate in his journey to India and the founding of his *khanqah* (hospice) in Trichy.

The theme of arduous travel is a common one in Sufi literature. In the case of Nathar Wali, the long descriptions of the saint's journeys may be taken as a metaphor for the progress toward spiritual knowledge and enlightenment which the true Sufi must undergo and which his disciples and devotees must hope to emulate as well. Thus as is usual in Sufi biographies, the narrative includes the saint's own quest for a *murshid* or spiritual master. The onerous commitment required by those who take up the Sufi path is indicated through accounts of the ordeals and tests of strength which the saint and his followers experience throughout their journey. There is also a literal side to these travel narratives. Much emphasis is given to Nathar Wali's epic progresses first to Mecca and then to the great Sufi shrines of western Asia and the Indian subcontinent. In his performance of the *haj*, the saint is shown to be conforming to one of the principal obligations of 'orthodox' Islamic behaviour. At the same time his own sanctity is enhanced through the accounts of *ziyarat* (pilgrimage) which identify him with the shrines and pilgrimage places of the wider Muslim world. The devotee is thus offered a model for his own religious conduct: he too must strive to accomplish the *haj*, and this crucial obligation which is enjoined upon all good Muslims is equated with the duty of the devotee to undertake pilgrimage to his master's *dargah*.

The accounts of travel also allow the biographers to celebrate the miraculous powers possessed by the saint. This too is an essential ingredient of the standard Sufi biographies because, as has already been seen, the performance of *karamat* or miracles is one of the key tests of authentic Sufi identity. The narrative therefore includes many incidents in which Nathar Wali deploys his powers to overcome the dangers and difficulties of the journey. On one occasion the saint and his 900 followers come to a raging ocean in the course of their travels. The disciples despair,

<sup>25</sup> (Pub. Trichinopoly 1976.) The key episodes of the Nathar Wali story appear in the *Bahar-i-Azam Jahi*: this pilgrimage chronicle was compiled in 1823, and the main features of the legend passed virtually unchanged into the *Tollayiram Vitaikal*.

but Nathar Wali seats them all on a single wooden house tile and pilots them safely through the storm. At another point in their journey the party is attacked by brigands: Nathar Wali conjures up a blinding dust cloud and the attackers fall around him in helpless supplication.<sup>26</sup>

As in the biographies of many other Sufis, the Trichy pir is portrayed as having begun his miraculous career long before he set off on his epic journey. Indeed the texts declare that Nathar Wali gave forewarning of his future powers by performing karamat while still in his mother's womb. While still unborn the foetus-saint floods his mother's room with light so that she may see to pray at midnight, and he leaps forth from within her body to fend off the charge of a maddened bull.<sup>27</sup> Even more dramatic deeds are described in the biographies of Shahul Hamid Naguri, the great pir of the coastal shrine at Nagore. This saint is portrayed as an infant *ghazi* (holy warrior) who gallops out of his mother's womb and defeats a horde of rampaging brigands who have attacked his natal town. (According to the biographical texts, Shahul Hamid was born at Manikpur in Awadh in 1502 and travelled with his disciples to the Tamil country in 1543; he is said to have died there in 1570). All this is very much the stuff of popular myth and legend throughout the Muslim world. As in other parts of Asia, these south Indian Muslim traditions have been influenced by a wealth of tales, motifs and hagiographic traditions which emanate from Persia, Turkey and the Arab lands. Though they have always been subject to local modification, their popularity meant that most south Indian Muslims came to be familiar with a group of stock figures – especially historical figures of the Muslim pantheon, most notably warriors and hero kings such as Sikandar and the Shia martyrs Ali and Hussain. Their stories provided many of the standard themes and episodes which found their way into the legends of Nathar Wali and other south Indian qalandar saints.<sup>28</sup>

But while this means that works such as the Pomegranate volume contain themes and terms of reference which link them to the idealised

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–6. Episodes of this type can be found in most other south Indian Sufi biographies. Comparable texts on the Nagore pir include Hasan, *The Divine Light of Nagore*; Maraikkayar, *Nakur Antavar Perumai* ('The Greatness of the Nagore Lord'); Janab Gulam Kadhuru Navalar, *Karunai-k-katal. Nakur Antavaravarkalin Punita Vazhkkai Varalaru* ('Ocean of Grace. The Holy Biography of the Nagore antavar'), J.M. Sali, *Nākūr Nāyakam Varalāru* ('Biography of the Lord of Nagore': Madras, 1981). Similar karamat are performed by one of the leading Karaikkal pirs in M.S. Maraikkayar, *Kāraikkāl Mastān Sāhibu Varalāru* ('Biography of Mastan Sahib of Karaikkal') (Karaikkal, 1980).

<sup>27</sup> *Tollayiram Vitaikal*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>28</sup> David Shulman, 'Muslim popular literature in Tamil: the *Tamimaṇṇāri Mālai*', in Yohanan Friedmann, ed., *Islam in Asia*, I, *South Asia* (Boulder, Colo., 1984), pp. 174–207.

historical chronicle traditions of north India, Persia and the Arab world, in the Tamil country these cult texts have come to depict the saint and his power in terms which derive unmistakably from the traditions of the Tamil 'high' gods and the fierce regional power divinities of the far south. To some no doubt this will be an unwelcome assertion, since it may seem to challenge the radical monotheism which lies at the heart of all 'pure' Islamic teaching. The point though is that the Muslim cult saint has always been a figure who may leap the boundaries between 'Hindu' and 'non-Hindu', 'Islamic' and 'un-Islamic'. He is therefore a figure who has moved in a sacred landscape which would be familiar to almost any south Indian. While he undergoes his heroic quest, the pir is a figure of the forest; he inhabits the same domain as the 'demonic' spirits and marauders who lie beyond the margins of the settled social order. In formal Hinduism this world of dangerous uncontained forces is the resort of the divine at its most awesome and terrifying. More specifically it is a Saivite world, a place of sakti divinities and of Lord Siva as the terrible Lord Bhairava, the hideous ascetic with his matted hair and shrunken skeletal body smeared with ash from the cremation ground.

Given the power of these motifs in south Indian society, it should come as no surprise to find that the region's tazkira literature contains a large body of clearly identifiable Saivite imagery. These Saivite themes are usually at their most explicit in accounts of the miraculous exploits which the pir performs in the course of his travels through the wilderness. In the Pomegranate volume for example, the saint and his disciples are lost in wild forest country and at the point of death from thirst and hunger. Incidents of this kind appear regularly in Indian Sufi biographies; the saint conjures up food and drink, the party is saved, and thus the story shows the saint's disciples how they too may be sustained by the grace which flows from the saint's miraculous barakat.

In these Tamil texts, though, the story allows for a sustained interweaving of Hindu and Muslim Sufi motifs. In formal theistic Saivism, the forest is the place to which the seeker must go in his quest for esoteric saving knowledge. It is thus the resort of the mythical Hindu king who strips off all worldly encumbrances and, like the seeker-prince Nathar Wali, endures privations and penances in his quest for enlightenment.<sup>29</sup> All this is perfectly compatible with the teachings of the Islamic mystics. In Sufism it is the pir who is the master of all esoteric teaching, and he too receives the boon of saving knowledge when he completes his quest for a murshid (a spiritual guide).

In the Nathar Wali quest story the pir and his party are saved from

<sup>29</sup> Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, p. 126.

starvation in the forest when a herd of deer materialise before them. The females of the herd offer up their milk to the saint and he then dispenses it to his followers.<sup>30</sup> At the most general level the flow of milk is an image of divine munificence: it is to be seen as the welling up of God's love and mercy and a proof of the saint's capacity to provide succour, fulfilment and spiritual nourishment to those who follow him. But there is also a strong echo from the Hindu tradition. Tamil stalapurana texts often refer to miraculous wellings up of milk: milk flows spontaneously at the sites where Lord Siva has concealed his sacred lingam emblem; libations of milk are poured as an act of worship over sacred images, and in many cult myths the purifying flow of milk is linked to images of the gushing of blood. These twin motifs proclaim the close relationship between the domain of bounty and purity and the overlapping world of violence and polluting destructive energy.<sup>31</sup>

In Indian Saivite iconography, deer are the emblem of Siva in his personification as Bhairava the forest wanderer. In this form the deity is seen as an outcast living beyond the confines of settled human society. He is befriended only by the creatures of the wilderness, and he offers love and consolation to those who follow his painful path. In his poverty and asceticism the ideal Sufi too is also a kind of outcast, and there is no reason why the two sets of motifs should not reinforce and confirm one another. The parallel is particularly close in the case of the Sufi qalandars, mazdhubs and faqirs whose 'wildness' has often been condemned by more conventional Muslim mystics. Even in the case of the Muslim world's institutionalised Sufis, however, the quest for spiritual perfection has frequently been portrayed as a physical ordeal, and this notion harmonises easily with the Saivite image of the divine ascetic offering hope and succour in his forest exile.

More Saivite motifs appear in the Nathar Wali narrative when the party are shown losing their way yet again in thick jungle. The pir's disciples are ready to despair, but they are saved when a pride of lions appear: the beasts make their *salaams* to the saint and then carry him and his followers to safety. This too is a direct and vivid evocation of the Sufi experience, first the pain and ceaseless testing to be undergone in the search for spiritual knowledge, and then the ecstasy of rescue and fulfilment. Again, though, these images of the dumb forest beasts clustering round the saint and offering up humble service to him correspond to motifs from the Hindu devotional tradition.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Tollayiram Vitaikal*, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, pp. 93–110.

<sup>32</sup> *Tollayiram Vitaikal*, p. 23.

The lion is a well-known emblem of royalty in south Indian iconography, and as an embodiment of ferocity and strength it serves the Saivite warrior goddess Durga as her vehicle or mount. Several other south Indian pirs are described in precisely this way, as lion-mounted figures of majesty. The nineteenth-century pir Hazarat Shaikh Pirullah Hadi-Sher Sawar is described by his devotees as a saint who comes riding on a lion. It is also notable that the site of this pir's dargah at Dongri near Salem is known locally as 'Sanyasi Gundu' – sanyasi being a term used of Hindu ascetics and holy men.<sup>33</sup> These lion-riding saints are all to be perceived as figures of terror, as destroyers and conquerors as well as bringers of peace and comfort. The region's tazkira literature bristles with ferocious imagery, as for example in the biographies of the pir known as Sultan Saiyid Baba Fakiruddin Hussain Sistani. This saint's tomb is located in the Vijayanagar fortress town of Penukonda (now in Andhra Pradesh) and the site has been an active and well-endowed Sufi shrine for at least 200 years; it was a favoured recipient of patronage from Tipu Sultan of Mysore. Baba Fakiruddin is generally portrayed as Nathar Wali's earliest and most favoured murid (disciple), and in the biographical texts and legends he appears as a demonic lion-mounted warrior hero who brandishes a live serpent (a naga) in place of a whip.<sup>34</sup>

The early colonial ethnographer Colin Mackenzie collected two Persian biographies of this saint: his manuscript translations of these works are dated July 1803 and December 1804.<sup>35</sup> In the 1804 text there is a long description of the ordeals and miraculous exploits which occur during the saint's epic journey to India from his homeland in central Asia. Here again the pir is portrayed as an outcast who performs heroic austerities and receives supplication and service from the beasts of the wilderness. Thus at one point Baba Fakiruddin travels into the Rajasthan desert and enters a state of trance-like contemplation while standing on one foot. His state of rapture lasts for three years and it is so deep that he remains immobile even when insects begin to eat away his body, snakes twine round his torso, ants lodge in his ears and birds build their nests in his beard.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', p. 67.

<sup>34</sup> 'History of Sultan Syed Babur Takuriddin' [1804 Mackenzie text], p. 15. Other early versions of the Baba Fakiruddin tradition include an account in Kannada which was transcribed for Mackenzie in 1801. ('Historical Account of Panoo Conda or Penna-Conda from information collected there Oct. 15th 1801') Mackenzie Collection – General. Vol. 11, pp. 163–76, IOL.

<sup>35</sup> The text dated 21 July 1803 is entered in the Mackenzie Collection as Unbound Translations. Class 1 – Persian: 18. 'Account of Pennakonda', IOL.

<sup>36</sup> 1804 text, p. 25. This has much in common with the myth of the Jain saint Bahubali whose gigantic naked statue is situated at the top of the Sravanabelagola hill shrine in Karnataka (formerly Mysore state).

Eventually the saint is commanded to end his ordeal, and he proceeds south to Trichy to begin his discipleship at the khanaqah of the great Tamil pir Nathar Wali. Before he sets off the snakes pay homage to Baba Fakiruddin by 'laying their heads upon his blessed foot'.<sup>37</sup> This is a gesture which signifies the enraptured submission of the devotee. Both in Hindu bhakti worship and in the Sufi devotional tradition, representations of feet or footprints are frequently used as objects of veneration. Initiates are seen as casting themselves at the feet of the divine being. At the Nagore dargah this becomes a literal act of self-abasement: devotees receive a smart rap on the head with a silver box containing the saint's footprint relic.<sup>38</sup>

Baba Fakiruddin is also shown ascending 'the mountain of Soliman' (Sulaiman) and performing devotions near the throne of this much-revered prophet.<sup>39</sup> The Nagore pir is yet another saint who rides a lion. He is also served by a tiger, and according to the 1804 Mackenzie text, Baba Fakiruddin's tomb was attended by a tiger who displayed his homage to the saint by sweeping the dargah precincts with its tail.<sup>40</sup> The guru of a bhakti sect frequently bears a tiger's skin: these tiger images serve to invest the Sufi with the emblems of the Hindu sanyasi or holyman/ascetic.

### Pirs in the Saivite sacred landscape

Nathar Wali is far from being the only cult saint in Tamilnad who has been portrayed by his biographers as a figure of the wilderness. Another pir whose cult has been growing in power since the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century is a qalandar saint known simply as Kat Bava, literally 'forest father' in Tamil.<sup>41</sup> The Kat Bava tomb shrine is located in the old Tondaiman domain of Pudukkottai, and for this saint too the legends and biographical texts make striking use of Saivite imagery. One of the central incidents of the saint's career occurs during his own version

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> Among the Gujarati-speaking cultivators who use the caste title Kanbi, one group, the Matia Kanbis of Surat, came to identify themselves as disciples of a sixteenth-century pir known as Imam Shah. The saint is said to have won their allegiance by levitating them en masse to Benares where they all bathed in the Ganges, visited the city's temples and feasted the Brahmins all without leaving the village. At one of the shrines frequented by the pir's devotees, pilgrims were said to 'worship' (i.e. venerate) the great toe of the saint's living heir and successor. R.E. Enthoven, *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, II (Bombay, 1922), pp. 151-4.

<sup>39</sup> 1804 Baba Fakiruddin text, p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31. Sweeping the sacred precinct is an act of homage which confers great prestige in the Muslim world: see below, p. 172.

<sup>41</sup> Venkatarama Ayyar, *Manual of the Pudukkottai State*, II, Pt 2, pp. 1174, 1388; Pharoah, *Gazetteer* p. 429; Ja'far Sharif, *Qanun-i-Islam*, p. 135.

of the familiar epic journey. In this case the forest father saves a group of travellers who have become lost in the wilderness and are attacked by dacoits (brigands). This is the same sort of episode as Nathar Wali's encounter with brigands, and indeed such incidents of heroic rescue constitute one of the standard motifs of Indian Sufi biographies. What gives this telling its special interest though is the fact that the dacoits' intended victims are a party of seven maidens who have lost their way in Kat Bava's wilderness. As any south Indian worshipper would know, these female figures are to be identified with the Saivite *saptamatrikas*, that is the seven-figured corporate representation of the goddess which appears in temple iconography and stalapurana texts throughout the Tamil country.<sup>42</sup> Some versions of the Kat Bava legend even say that the maidens are of Brahman birth, thus making the Hindu identity of the characters absolutely explicit.

Tamil tazkira literature also tends to feature episodes which allow the pir to stand forth in a position of dominance over figures of the Hindu pantheon. Here the Hindu goddess-maidens must turn to Kat Bava when they are attacked and threatened with defilement. Obviously the incident serves as a display of the saint's ascendancy: it declares that even Hindu divinities are brought to acknowledge Kat Bava's powers of succour and protection. At the same time the incident resembles the Kanchipuram pir's miraculous release of the Hindu temple chariot. In both cases, tokens of Hindu divinity are cited as actual components of the Muslim saint's power and prestige. The Kanchipuram pir is all the more imposing through being associated with a great Hindu ceremonial event, and, in order to make the point, the festival and its sacred regalia are left in their original Hindu state instead of being replaced or formally 'Islamised' by the saint.

Kat Bava too takes on additional glory through being linked with powerful Hindu divinities in these biographical traditions. The seven maidens retain their original identity and are not converted to Islam like the penitent brigands in the story. Instead they are portrayed as grateful suppliants who place themselves under the saint's protection and then go on their way, still figures of the Hindu pantheon even though they have been brought into the Muslim antavar's sacred network. Indeed much the same significance attaches to another of the common conventions of south Indian tazkira literature which is to place the Sufi within a religious landscape combining Hindu and Muslim terms of reference. The biographers of the Nagore saint state that Shahul Hamid's birthplace at Manikpur is to be considered an especially auspicious site because it is

<sup>42</sup> Nilakanta Sastri, *Development of Religion*, p. 66.

located near the confluence of the rivers Ganges and Jamna: most readers would know this as a site of particular sanctity in the subcontinent's Hindu religious landscape. Furthermore, as in the tazkiras of many other Muslim pirs, Shahul Hamid's epic travels incorporate Hindu as well as Muslim pilgrimage places. On his way to Nagore the saint journeys to Ramesvaram, Kanniyakumari and Tenkasi (literally 'the southern Benares') as well visiting all the conventional Muslim holy places; he also visits Mecca and Medina and the shrines of the famous west Asian Sufi masters including the Baghdad dargah of Abdul Qadir Jilani.<sup>43</sup>

Another common reference to Saivite tradition is the appearance in many tazkira texts of the sacred bull Nandi, divine vehicle and attendant of the god Siva. This much-loved figure of the Hindu pantheon suffers many vicissitudes in these works. One pir, Shah Bheka of Trichy, forces the local Hindu ruler (the nayaka queen-regent *rāni* Magnammal, 1689–1704) to endow his khanaqah by animating the stone image of the bull from a nearby temple; the unfortunate Nandi is then made to gallop upside down through the city until the rani gives in to the saint's demands. In the Nagore tazkiras Nandi suffers an even greater indignity: the disciples of Shahul Hamid slaughter and eat the divine bull, and the saint then displays his miraculous powers by bringing the digested fragments back to life.<sup>44</sup>

In this incident the pir uses his intercessory power on behalf of the Hindu divinity and actually identifies with Nandi in opposition to his own followers. This is not something which can be dismissed as a minor 'syncretic' aberration in the legend of a single eccentric Tamil saint. With numerous variations, the killing and resuscitation of Nandi appears over and over again in the Sufi biographies of south India. Furthermore this is not a motif which appears solely in the region's Tamil texts, or in the cults of saints like the Nagore and Trichy pirs who might be dismissed as being among the most thoroughly 'Tamilised' of the region's Muslim antavars. On the contrary, the Nandi story also features in the region's Urdu and Persian Sufi works, and in cult traditions where one might expect to find relatively little in the way of so-called 'borrowings' from the region's wider pantheistic culture.

There is a particularly striking example of this in the 1803 Mackenzie manuscript – an account originally composed in Persian – which tells the story of the fierce snake-wielding pir Baba Fakiruddin. According to this text Baba Fakiruddin and his disciples settled at Penukonda when the

<sup>43</sup> *Divine Light of Nagore*, pp. 1, 30, 32; *Karunai-k-katal*, p. 81.

<sup>44</sup> *Bahar*, p. 63; *Divine Light of Nagore*, p. 30.

town was the seat of a Hindu ruler named 'Seringarayar'.<sup>45</sup> The king and his courtiers refuse to provide food for the party, and this means that they have violated the obligation of pious munificence which was one of the main pillars of Indian kingship. When the deity of one of the town's Hindu temples learns of this, he makes Baba Fakiruddin a present of his own sacred bull so that the saint's followers may slaughter and eat it. The story then concludes as in the Nagore tazkiras: the saint strikes his stick on the ground; Nandi's severed and digested fragments are miraculously reassembled, and the bull springs back to life.<sup>46</sup>

The story is handled very differently in the second of the two Penukonda texts: these variations in the legend show how the same basic story could take on a distinct symbolic content in the hands of different Muslim chroniclers. Baba Fakiruddin's wrath is much more terrible in the 1804 account: 14,000 Hindu temples are shattered into dust when the saint strikes his stick on the ground and utters the *adhān* (the Muslim call to prayer), and an angel proclaims that Nandi must be slaughtered and thrown as carrion to the dogs and kites. This is a particularly savage act, not only because of the smashing of temples but also because of the reference to scavenging animals: Muslims regard dogs as unclean and defiling.<sup>47</sup>

In this version of the story then there is a much sharper sense of confrontation between Hindu and Muslim sacred power than is usual in south Indian Sufi literature. But even in this account Nandi is ultimately revived: however harsh their tone, by invoking the image of Nandi these biographers are still associating the saint with a popular Tamil Hindu divinity. Furthermore, Nandi is especially suitable for incorporation into Sufi biographies because his Hindu worshippers perceive him as the embodiment of male potency in its inactive state. Siva's bull is a figure of unaroused strength and virility; his procreative powers have been channelled and contained and are therefore free from defiling lust. The Sufi too is a figure who can be seen in terms of the husbanding or containment of explosive male energies. Ideally the Sufi should be a figure who has divorced himself from the flesh and the world. The biographers of south Indian pirs regularly refer to them as renouncers: 'Sayyid Ahmad

<sup>45</sup> Probably the Vijayanagar king Sriranga Raya I (1572–86). Penukonda was a key Vijayanagar fortress site; it was a refuge for the Vijayanagar line after they were ousted by the Deccani Muslim forces. The saint has also been linked to the region's Hindu Wodeiyar chiefs. See 'Historical Account of Panoo Conda or Penna Conda from Information collected there October 15th 1801', Mackenzie Collection, IOL; also N. Venkataramanayya, *Further Sources of Vijayanagar History* (3 vols., Madras, 1946), I, pp. 301–9.

<sup>46</sup> 1803 Penukonda MS, Mackenzie, IOL, pp. 29–30.

<sup>47</sup> 1804 Penukonda MS, Mackenzie, IOL, pp. 56–8.

was known as *Ya Pir*. He renounced the world and became the *khalifa* of Shah Azmatullah Qadiri. He was a pious man.<sup>48</sup>

It is often made clear that the Sufi's powers depend upon this renunciation of the world and its pleasures, and so in his character as an ascetic renouncer, the Muslim pir begins to come close to the figure of Lord Siva in his incarnation as a forest ascetic and outcast.<sup>49</sup> This aspect of the Tamil religious tradition may help to explain the fierce misogyny which is so common in the region's Sufi biographies. One of the key themes of these works is the presumption that marriage and procreation would negate the Sufi's *barakat*. In much of the Muslim world, *pirzadas* (hereditary shrine guardians) usually claim to be direct descendants of the Sufi whose *dargah* they control. In the Tamil country, the biographers of local pirs often take pains to establish that the pir has transmitted his *barakat* to a chosen successor without compromising his chastity. This is why so many apparently unlikely objects – most notably the tooth-brushing twigs of certain pirs – have come to be invested with a degree of sanctity which might seem distinctly odd to a western observer.

The explanation for this is that throughout India bodily secretions, especially blood, semen, saliva and human wastes, are thought of as being charged with a form of power and energy which may be both menacing and protective. The god manifests his awesome potency with a great flow of blood; the individual's wastes and secretions are a source of danger and pollution to others. Lesser beings accept saliva-impregnated leavings from their superiors, and so the Hindu devotee takes the divine 'leavings' or *prasatam* of the god as a token of fealty and a source of protective and transforming sacred energy.

In south India the pir's devotees also perceive their lord's saliva as a medium which carries and transmits his *barakat*. Here too the disciple seeks out contact with a transforming substance which would otherwise be conceived of as unclean and defiling. Tamil Sufi texts often assert that the founding pir of a particular cult shrine identified his heir and

<sup>48</sup> *Bahar*, p. 119. The theme of Nandi's sacrifice may derive from the heroic sacrifice (actually an act of self-sacrifice) of the warrior-asura (demon) who is slaughtered by the goddess and is then transformed into a princely devotee and a subject within her realm. Like Siva, this warrior requires the goddess to complete the sacrifice for him. In the Muslim *tazkiras*, the pir acts alone; he is a transcendent being who kills and restores his victim, needing no supernatural partner to found his divine realm. (These points are based on a number of helpful suggestions made by Professor Jan Heesterman.)

<sup>49</sup> Another forest qalandar pir is Kattanai Vali ('forest elephant saint') whose *dargah* is at Vethalai, twenty two miles east of Ramnad. Kattanai Vali is said to have acquired the devoted service of a wild elephant after having removed a thorn from its foot. This Androcles-like tale is part of the story of the saint's ascetic sojourn in the forests of Sumatra; he is supposed to have reigned as sultan in one of the port kingdoms frequented by Tamil Muslim traders. Sali, *Tamilakattu Tarkakkal*, p. 201.

successor by bequeathing him the twig which he used for tooth-cleaning. Such an object would naturally be impregnated with the saint's saliva and would therefore serve to pass on the pir's endowment of power and sanctity without involving him in an act of procreation.<sup>50</sup> Baba Fakiruddin is portrayed as having received a tooth-brushing twig as a token of spiritual succession from his murshid or preceptor, the Trichy pir Nathar Wali. According to the texts, it is this twig which grew up into the miraculous staff of the Nandi episode. The wooden staff also becomes imbued with the miraculous transforming barakat of the pir. Like the saint who can transmit his sacred energy from one successor to another without indulging in carnal acts, the lifeless stick is said to have borne miraculous fruit and blossoms, and to have grown up into a miraculous tree which perpetually gives forth divine bounty (conceived of as outpourings of sugar) to those who are entitled to receive the pir's grace.<sup>51</sup>

There are many other Saivite divinities who figure in the foundation accounts of the region's dargahs. In the case of Muslim and Christian holy places as well as Hindu temples, legends which recount the origin of particular shrines often show how local believers fit these institutions into a wider sacred landscape containing shrines which are sacred to the whole population, Hindu as well as Muslim. It will be remembered that many hilltop dargahs are identified by local Muslims – pirzadas as well as ordinary devotees – as former temples of the Saivite deity Murukan/Subrahmanya, and that in his personification as Skanda the warrior hero, this important regional divinity has long been identified with the pre-Islamic hero Sikandar.<sup>52</sup> The Subrahmanya tradition has tended to overlap with the cult traditions of many other Tamil pirs, and this conjuncture has been particularly common in the Madurai and Trichy areas. The region's Hindu groups (or those worshippers who would now be identified as formally professing Hindus) have also tended to see a strong connection between Subrahmanya and the world of Tamil Muslim devotion. This link is reflected in many local stalapurana myths. For example at Manjavayal in Tanjore district, there is an old tradition which states that Lord Subrahmanya of Palni originally manifested himself at the site of the local temple in response to an appeal made by a Muslim worshipper.<sup>53</sup>

Subrahmanya is usually represented as a six-headed human figure

<sup>50</sup> On saliva as a medium for the transmission of barakat, see E. Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (London, 1926), I, p. 93.

<sup>51</sup> 1803 Penukonda MS, Mackenzie, IOL, p. 25.

<sup>52</sup> See above, chapter 3.

<sup>53</sup> Baliga, *Tanjore*, p. 422.

mounted on a peacock *vahana* (vehicle). One of the most common items of regalia to be found at Tamil dargahs is a wand made of peacock feathers, usually bound round the base with an ornate silver band. The peacock wand has long been used in both north and south India as an emblem of power and kingship. It formed part of the regalia of the Mughal *darbar* (the great central ritual of kingship in the Mughal political order) but it has become an important symbol for non-Muslims as well: among the Sikhs for example the sweeping of the great courtyards of the Golden Temple at Amritsar may only be performed with peacock feather wands. In many parts of south India the officiants at Muslim dargahs use peacock wands to administer a ceremonial knock on the head to devotees who have made offerings to the shrine: this is another means by which the devotee signifies his submission to the spiritual sovereignty of the *pir*. But while this focus on the peacock symbol is not unique to the Tamil shrines, the use of the wands in the Tamil country has also served to connect the figure of the Muslim cult saint with the tradition of the divine warrior-king Subrahmanya-Kartikkeya.<sup>54</sup>

Many south Indians also venerate time-honoured cult objects which possess at least some of the same qualities and powers as the Saivite *lingam*, emblem of deified male power and its accompanying female symbol the *yoni*.<sup>55</sup> (At south Indian Siva temples the figure of Nandi, often a huge image carved in stone, sits facing the upright *lingam* or image of the god in its sanctum: the divine bull is usually carved with a *lingam* and *yoni* emblem placed between his forelegs.) This would seem to be the underlying symbolism of the mysterious vessel-shaped *kaltotti* stone which has been kept for many centuries in one of the principal mosques in the old Muslim trading town of Kulasekarapatanam. The mosque itself is said to have been built by a sea-going Hindu Chettiar merchant who made his fortune importing horses for the region's mediaeval Pandya armies: he is supposed to have built both the mosque and a Siva temple on adjoining sites along the town's shoreline. The vessel is maintained with great secrecy by its family of hereditary guardians. It is not a focus of mass public veneration, but the town gains considerable prestige from its possession of the *kaltotti*. It is likely that the object is actually a stone *yoni* emblem from a Siva temple and that it has come to be incorporated into the local sacred landscape like the object which represents the Sulaiman throne at the Silambar temple.

<sup>54</sup> On the symbolism of the peacock among south Indian Christians, see below, pp. 263–5.

<sup>55</sup> At a more abstract level the *lingam* is the *axis mundi* or axis of the universe. T.S. Maxwell, 'Mythology of Shiva and the goddess', in George Michell, Catherine Lampert and Tristram Holland, eds., *In the Image of Man. The Indian Perception of the Universe through 2,000 Years of Painting and Sculpture* (London, 1982), p. 214.

The Saivite tradition also seems to have given added power to a famous holy place in the hinterland Tirunelveli village of Manur. The main feature of this site is a seven-foot stone pillar which still attracts large numbers of Hindu and Muslim devotees. Here too there is an amalgamation of Hindu dynastic themes with conventional motifs and symbols from the Muslim world. When the East India Company surveyor Thomas Turnbull observed the pillar in the 1820s it was said to have been levitated from Mecca at the behest of yet another Hindu Pandya king: the link with the symbolism of the Saivite lingam is particularly clear in this case.<sup>56</sup>

### Muslim cult saints and the Vaishnavite divinities

The argument thus far is that the south Indian pir has often been revered within an explicitly Saivite sacred landscape. In the texts and oral traditions he contends with savage forest marauders. He sheds his grace over suppliant sakti deities and the person of Lord Siva's divine bull Nandi. He acquires the power of esoteric knowledge in the wilderness; he comes forth as an austere and awesome avenger with a snake-whip goad and the power to bring down terror and destruction on those who oppose him. He often equips himself with the symbols and emblems of the Saivite tradition, and some Muslim worshippers have even addressed their pirs, in the name of Siva: in the early years of this century a devotee of the Karaikkal saint Mastan Sahib was found to be wearing an amulet containing the inscription, '*OM – nāma siva r.u. Mastān Sāhibu avergal padame tunai*' (OM/Lord Siva/(I seek for) help at the very feet of Lord Mastan Sahib).<sup>57</sup>

What then of the south Indian Vaishnavite tradition with its opulent display and its focus on an ideal of divine transcendent majesty? In formal theistic Hinduism the worship of Siva and Vishnu tended to overlap and complement one another. It should come as no surprise then to find that the Vaishnavite conception of divinity has also helped to shape the motifs and institutions of the Tamilnad pir cults, and that south Indian devotional works have regularly described a clear-cut progression from Saivite to Vaishnavite attributes in the Sufi's career.

The Nathar Wali texts provide one of the clearest illustrations of this. While he pursues his quest through the demonic wilderness, Nathar Wali

<sup>56</sup> Turnbull, 'Memoir', p. 31–2; Pate, *Tinnevely*, pp. 476–7. The pillar is known for its healing and curative powers.

<sup>57</sup> OM is the best known of all Hindu mantras (sacred formulae which gather and concentrate cosmic power.) Edgar Thurston, *Omens and Superstitions of Southern India* (London, 1912), p. 197; M.S. Maraikkayar, *Karaikkal Mastan Sahibu Varalaru*.

is endowed with Saivite trappings and attributes; once the epic struggle is complete and the saint begins to reign from his great seat in Trichy, the story acquires explicitly Vaishnavite features. This is not to say that the tazkiras and legends drop their references to sakti and the imagery of the Saivite forest divinities. But the emphasis does shift; new images come to counterbalance and overlap with these earlier elements. This can be seen for example in the *Tollayiram Vitaikal* volume. In this text there is a passage which describes the pir presiding from within his great seat of power, the khanaqah which he founds in Trichy. The section begins with a perfectly conventional description of the saint engaged in the life of prayer and spiritual discipline which one would expect of the practising Sufi. This is then followed by an account of a miraculous occurrence which takes place while the pir is in repose in his place of meditation:

Baba [Nathar Wali] noticed when the time for prayer was nearing that he did not have any water for washing his hands and legs. And so to meet his need for water an enormous cobra with 12 heads appeared, and so that he could perform [his ablutions] it brought him water from the eastern side of the mountain of Tiruchirapalli.

The account concludes,

Even today you may see the mark of this [miracle] on the mountain. Thus even the animals did service to Baba. All these karamat [miracles] are due to the grace of Allah.<sup>58</sup>

This remarkable piece of imagery is not to be taken as a simple parable showing that the saint's power draws even dumb beasts to do him honour. To the south Indian worshipper the cobra was immediately recognisable as the great serpent emblem of the god Vishnu. The text refers specifically to the 'mountain of Trichy', the great 300-foot Trichy Rock which is a place of pilgrimage for Muslims as well as Hindus. Amongst the many sacred sites on the Rock there are two indentations worn into the rock face along the pilgrim's route to the summit. One of these is revered as the footprint of Vishnu, the other is the mark associated with this miraculous event in the career of the Trichy pir Nathar Wali: the two are clearly part of the same local devotional tradition, and this overlapping of the two legends comes through unmistakably in the text.

Throughout south India Vishnu is depicted in devotional texts and temple carvings as a king in majesty accompanied by the many-headed serpent Sesha or Ananda. It is in this form that the deity is represented at the great Vaishnavite temple at Srirangam, which is on the outskirts of Trichy just a few miles from the Nathar Wali dargah. At Srirangam the

<sup>58</sup> *Tollayiram Vitaikal*, p. 47.

cobra's multiple heads and outstretched hood shelter the god as he lies sleeping on the serpent's coils. This image derives from the Hindu myth which portrays Lord Vishnu in trance-like sleep awaiting the next of the great cosmic time-cycles: when he awakes the universe will be recreated once again.

In the Tamil country Vishnu is also frequently seen in his waking form, enthroned on the cobra's coils. This is the personification of the deity which seems closest to the image of Nathar Wali in the *Tollayiram Vitaikal*: Sesha thus appears as another figure of power from the Hindu tradition whose deference serves to enhance the standing of the Muslim pir. This is not the only use of the serpent image in south India Sufi chronicles. The *Bahar-i-Azam Jahi* employs an equally vivid reference to the Vaishnavite tradition: this is the image which has already been referred to, that of the cult saint Shah Alimullah Qadiriyya who appears stretched out asleep while the great cobra spreads its hood to shade him.<sup>59</sup> In this case the image clearly derives from the myth of the sleeping Vishnu: again it is being shown that the saint receives the same homage and humble service which the supernatural devotees of theistic Hinduism render up to the 'orthodox' high deities.

In this case, the image clearly derives from the myth of the sleeping Vishnu. Again the text declares that the saint is a being of transcendent majesty. So long as he remains in his potentially active form, enthroned in his khanaqah or benignly receiving the homage of his suppliants, the saint may take on the qualities of the divine Vishnu. This is a transformation which simply sidesteps the formal conflict between polytheistic 'high' Hinduism and the radical monotheism of textual Islam. In his moment of contained or potential power the saint is all transcendence. For the south Indian worshipper – or at least for a very large number of south Indian worshippers – this makes him Vishnu, a being who reigns over a domain inhabited by figures of authentic divinity who have become universally recognised, both by those who come to identify themselves as Muslims and by those whose formal affiliation would commonly be thought of as Hindu. Sesha-Ananda is the most important of these figures in the Nathar Wali texts, but there are many other such figures who fulfil the sacred function of rendering praise and humble service to the saint.

### **The Tamil cult saint and the south Indian goddess tradition**

What then of the pir as an active force, a dispenser of awesome power or barakat, a worker of miracles, a leader of disciples and a divine intercessor

<sup>59</sup> *Bahar*, pp. 60–1.

for all mankind? It is at this point that we arrive back at the tradition of south Indian goddess worship. As an activated being, a conqueror and builder of ever-growing devotional networks or domains, the Muslim cult saint moves quite naturally into the world of the sakti deity or amman. Although it has already been shown that Muslim cult saints have been portrayed as austere and terrifying figures, the pir is usually described by western scholars as a benign being, a comforter and healer and a source of refuge for the afflicted. If this is all that we see of the cult saint, then the goddess must appear an unlikely candidate for the role of unifier or universal reference point for the region's activated cult traditions.

It will be remembered that in south India as in other parts of the sub-continent, the cult of the amman or goddess is suffused with images of blood, terror and destruction. In the human world the demonic energies which the goddess confronts and with which she is identified are realised in the form of illness and other physical afflictions. Most notable among these are the diseases which are seen as products of bodily heat – fevers, cholera and skin eruptions ranging from rashes and boils to smallpox, the special fiery 'pearls' of the goddess. As Balfour found in the middle of the nineteenth century, 'The hindoos . . . [have] personified this pestilence [cholera] into a goddess [Mariamman] . . . and believe that if they neglect her worship she destroys them by the disease . . . . When a person is attacked with small pox, they believe that the goddess has taken possession of the sick man. They entertain a great dread of this goddess.'<sup>60</sup>

In this system of belief there is no real distinction between affliction and its relief, between the disease and its cure. The goddess shrines which are so numerous in the Tamil country have almost invariably been resorts for those afflicted with disease and infirmity. At the same time the disease is the fiery wrath of the goddess. Her sakti is deployed in a righteous cause, but it is capricious, vengeful and destructive once it is liberated and allowed to carry out its terrible cleansing function. Thus disease and other manifestations of the amman's anger may only be dispelled if the sufferer succeeds in appeasing the goddess, if he performs rites and makes offerings which cool or damp down her anger and thus bring about the containment of her liberated sakti.<sup>61</sup>

So do these terrible vengeful amman figures really differ from south India's pirs in the way that they are represented and perceived by their

<sup>60</sup> Balfour, *Cyclopaedia*, V, p. S-35.

<sup>61</sup> 'While in the house, the sexes remain apart until recovery and until the sick have been purified by ablution. They place the leaves of the margosa tree beside the sick person, because the goddess is supposed to delight in this tree. They give cooling food but employ neither internal nor external remedies, in reverence for the deity.' *Ibid*.

devotees? The answer, despite all the conventional wisdom which treats Hindu and Muslim belief as polar opposites, is that the two traditions possess almost identical conceptions of activated divine power. In south India the Muslim pir or antavar has been perceived in terms which correspond almost exactly to those which characterise the region's power divinities, and in particular the blood-taking Tamil goddess.

The pirs of the Tamil country have certainly been portrayed as healers of man's mental and physical afflictions. In the devotional literature the Muslim saint or antavar is 'the Ocean of Grace'; 'the friend of those who sing your praises'; a font of balm and sweet comfort.<sup>62</sup> The many hymns of praise directed at the pirs of Tamilnad contain images which evoke the comfort and spiritual peace to be found at the saint's shrine. Within the precincts of the Nagore dargah, for example, there is a great tank or artificial pond: its waters are held to cool and purify just like the waters of a Hindu temple tank. In the *Nākaiyantāti*, the best known of all Tamil Muslim devotional poems, the tank of the Nagore shrine is described as the shining garment of the pir and as a haven of sweetness and comfort bedecked with the auspicious lotus. The lotus is yet another well-known Hindu symbol, and in the poem the dargah and its tank are a refuge for all where 'bees with beautiful wings come to sip sweet honey', where afflictions are soothed and all supplications are met. 'You who are beloved of God and his Prophet, rid me of my disease, shower your grace upon me, cure my disease King of Nagore', sing the devotees of Shahul Hamid.<sup>63</sup>

The dargahs of Tamilnad have long functioned as healing centres, and, as in the *Nakaiyantati* verses, the texts which praise and glorify the region's pirs have often portrayed their barakat as a universal balm endowed with the power to soothe distress and banish pain and disease. The powers of a given saint are often defined with great precision: one of the Porto Novo pirs, a seventeenth-century female saint known as Hazarat al-Quraish Bibi, is praised in one of the south Indian texts for her ability to cure 'scorpion bite and also all kinds of limb pains'.<sup>64</sup> The same work says that another woman saint, Hazarat Zaccha Bibi, 'comes in the vision of the delivering women and helps them in their times of distress'. This is a dargah of relatively recent origin, and it is particularly interesting for its success in bridging the gulf between the world of

<sup>62</sup> Kadhiru Navalar, *Karunai-k-katal*; and the *Nākaiyantāti*, by the nineteenth-century Kayalpatanam poet Abdul Kadir Nayinar Labbai.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* The India Office Library, London has at least four editions of the *Nakaiyantati*, including the original 1843 version published in Madras, and several later editions published in Madras in 1872 and 1914, and in Colombo in 1943. It is still sold by Muslim booksellers throughout Tamilnadu.

<sup>64</sup> Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', p. 41.

modern 'scientific' medicine, and the traditions of healing associated with the pir and his barakat. The Zaccha Bibi shrine is located inside the grounds of a government hospital in Tanjore district, and it is much resorted to by the hospital's maternity patients.<sup>65</sup>

All this is in keeping with the role played by Muslim tomb shrines in other parts of Asia: dargahs have always attracted both Muslims and non-Muslims who believe that the miraculous power of the pir and his shrine will cure ailments of the mind and body, including afflictions such as infertility and possession by malevolent 'demonic' forces. In the Tamil country, however, this parallel between Muslim saint cults and the Hindu goddess tradition involves more than a superficial similarity between the healing functions performed at dargahs and amman shrines. While many tazkiras and devotional poems have depicted the pirs of Tamilnad as founts of balm and protective power, these qualities are rarely left unqualified. In the *Bahar* volume's account of the Trichy saint Sayyid Fariddudin Shahid, for example, the power of the saint is conveyed through images of beneficence and bounty which resemble those used in the *Nakaiyantati*. At this saint's tomb shrine there is also a fountain of sweet cool water. The text says,

Those who expected fulfilment of their hopes and desires through the mediation of the martyr [Sayyid Fariddudin Shahid], resorted to this spot . . . Such visitors were more often women. They dipped their hands into it with sincerity and piety, and brought out fresh paddy or flowers or green leaves or live fish, and such other things in accordance with the scope of their desire.<sup>66</sup>

But there is no unending flow of succour and sweetness at these shrines. However benign he appears the saint may withdraw his goodwill at any time. The texts and oral traditions highlight this ambivalence, inserting abrupt shifts of mood into the narrative and insisting on the capricious and punitive quality of the saint's power. In the case of Fariddudin Shahid, the nawab's chronicler bemoans the passing of the saint's benevolence. The context is one of the *Bahar* volume's rare acknowledgements of the shift in political power which has overtaken the Walahjah domain. Arcot has now been made subject to the authority of the Company Raj, and, says the *Bahar*, the impious *firangi* ('franks': infidels,

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>66</sup> *Bahar*, p. 59. These images of the blissful garden may seem wholly 'Islamic', but they also derive from the Tamil Subrahmanya tradition. For centuries the hilltop temple to Murukan (Skanda/Subrahmanya) as Dandayudapani ('bearer of the baton') at Palni in Madurai district has attracted both Muslim and Hindu pilgrims. Muslims say that the temple is the grave of a pir named 'Palni Bava'; they offer sugar and sweets at the temple and appeal to the saint for cures and blessings. Palni pilgrims carry the *kavadi*, a pole slung with a sealed container of milk; the milk stays fresh throughout the pilgrimage and is said to yield up live fish when opened at the shrine. Baliga, *Madurai*, p. 419.

foreigners) – men who are known only for the building of jails and court-houses and not for their benefactions to shrines and holy places – have built a prison near Fariddudin Shahid's dargah.

Now a prison house is established there for soldiers. These men, out of ignorance and heresy, behaved in a shameless way. They immersed their foul hands into the basin; some wanted to make trial of its efficacy. Consequently the flow of water diminished considerably. Flowers and such other things which they used to bring out of the basin disappeared completely.<sup>67</sup>

Here, too, political realities provide the context in which this cult tradition takes shape. The prison is real, but in the chronicle it becomes a token of man's improprieties and spiritual failings. The saint now dwells in an unpropitious and impious environment, and so he becomes cold and merciless: the fountain ceases to flow, and there are no more miraculous wellings up of fish and flowers. There is only one exception to this show of harshness. With a deft sense of what is due to his patron the nawab, the chronicler insists that the saint's bounty is temporarily re-established when his lord Azam Jah visits the site. On that occasion the domain of beneficence is temporarily recreated; the waters flow again and momentarily regain their taste of milk and sugar when the Walajah ruler partakes of them.<sup>68</sup>

In almost every Tamil Sufi biography and devotional text, even in those which describe the pir as a loving protector, the saint is also portrayed as a figure of terror whose powers are as awesome, as destructive and as capricious as those of the Tamil goddess. Episodes such as the slaughter of Nandi and Kat Bava's defeat of the forest brigands have already indicated that the pir's domain can become a place of terror and destruction. More specifically though, the ideology which identifies the Muslim antavar with affliction and disease corresponds precisely to the beliefs which inspire and give coherence to the tradition of Tamil goddess worship. Like the myths and legends of the Tamil ammans, accounts of the lives of south Indian Sufis are rich in images of bloody supernatural warfare. In these Muslim texts and legends as in the Tamil Hindu tradition, these struggles are presented as contests between divine order and the demonic forces which threaten to break their bounds and overwhelm the ordered and stable cosmos.

Such a correspondence can be seen in the *Tollayiram Vitaikal*, the Tamil biography of the Trichy pir Nathar Wali. This text contains a long, lurid account of a conflict waged by Nathar Wali when he first arrives in Trichy. The saint's opponent is a supernatural enemy whom the Muslim

<sup>67</sup> *Bahar*, p. 59.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

biographer repeatedly describes as an *asura* – the Hindu term for the demon enemy who is slain and beheaded by the goddess and then becomes her faithful devotee. This particular demon is known as Tiriasuran the three-headed or treble asura, and in the story the asura conjures up a whole demon army to do battle with the saint. In the end Nathar Wali slaughters all the asura's warriors by reversing their arrows in mid-air and magically shooting down the whole army. Only Tiriasuran is left alive.<sup>69</sup> In the *Bahar* volume's version of the story the 'execrable monster' is simply slain by the triumphant Nathar Wali. This text says that his heads are lopped off and the saint's tomb shrine is built on the spot where the headless corpse was interred. In both cases, though, the demon has been overcome and dismembered just like the goddess's opponent. At the same time this demon is incorporated into the saint's new centre of power: this is an unmistakable reference to the theme of head-severing which pervades the foundation stories of the region's poligar chiefdoms, and which portrays the construction of *vilaayat* (dominion) through the motif of heroic blood sacrifice.<sup>70</sup>

The Nathar Wali Pomegranate volume contains an even more striking account of the demon's death. The defeated Tiriasuran kneels before the triumphant pir and declares, "'I understand that my death is due to this terrible karamat of yours. But give me a boon so that my name will ever remain famous on this earth.'" And then, says the narrator, 'by the māha sakti of Baba [Nathar Wali] the three heads [of Tiriasuran] were lopped from his body and he fell down [dead]'. The implications of this are remarkable. The pir triumphs over the asura and forces the Hindu demon-enemy to acknowledge his supremacy. But the aroused avenging power of the saint is not referred to as his barakat: although this is a text produced primarily for and by professing Muslims, the term used for the saint's power is sakti, the terrible activated force of the Hindu goddess.<sup>71</sup>

### The pir and his power

The appearance of the term sakti to describe the power of the pir indicates a convergence of beliefs linking the goddess tradition with the cult of the Muslim antavar. This congruence can also be seen in the way that south Indian devotees have portrayed man's relations with the

<sup>69</sup> *Tollayiram Vitaikal*, p. 39.

<sup>70</sup> *Bahar*, p. 51. At one point it appears that the 'monster' is actually a Hindu deity who is worshipped by the local 'unbelievers' – the headless form is that of the '*but-ling*' or idol which is cast down and broken by the victorious Nathar Wali.

<sup>71</sup> *Tollayiram Vitaikal*, p. 39. The text also makes Nathar Wali a universal patron of the locality: it claims that the pir chose the name Trichy to honour the demon. *Ibid.*

Muslim pirs of Tamilnad. Like the goddess, the Tamil pir functions as a bringer of hideous affliction as well as a source of succour and healing. As in tazkira literature from other parts of the Muslim world the biographies of Nathar Wali and the other pirs of Tamilnad focus on miracles in which the saint cures the sick, restores sight to the blind and even raises the dead.

Here, though, the saint's karamat (miracles) are often anything but acts of love and succour. It will be remembered that the biographies of the Vellore literary Sufi Qurbi describe miraculous episodes in which the saint sends one of his enemies mad and conjures up a fiery holocaust to obliterate another. With his lion and his live snake-whip Baba Fakiruddin is an equally characteristic figure of the south Indian Sufi tradition. This is the saint whose dargah at Penukonda became celebrated for the magical tree which gives off an unending flow of sugar as a token of the saint's munificence. But the Baba Fakiruddin biographies also contain long accounts of the sufferings of the Hindu rulers who oppose the pir. One king is blinded by Baba Fakiruddin, and another is struck down with agonising internal pains: these are the symptoms of the poison which the king had smuggled into the pir's hospice in an attempt to murder him.<sup>72</sup>

There are many south Indian dargahs including the Baba Fakiruddin shrine which contain sacred miracle-working trees, and this in itself is an important parallel with the Tamil Hindu tradition. Sacred trees are a feature of Hindu temples throughout the Tamil country. Shulman sees them as tokens of the primeval forest: they represent the domain of chaos and disorder which is always lurking at the fringes of the shrine's pure and ordered domain.<sup>73</sup> The tree is thus one of many links which connect the world of ritual harmony to the forces of power, violence and generation. In south Indian dargahs the tree functions in precisely this way: it is controlled by the pir; it is made to blossom as an expression of the saint's power and his connection with violent life-giving energies. This adds

<sup>72</sup> 1804 Baba Fakiruddin MS, Mackenzie, pp. 58–9, 70. This was the sugar tree that is said to have grown from the tooth-cleaning twig bestowed on the saint by his murshid Nathar Wali. The barren stick which blossoms and grows is an image of bounty and burgeoning new life in many Indian tazkira texts. There is a reminder, though, that sweetness and bounty has its dark side: in this version of the story the murderous king inserts his poison into an offering of sweetmeats. *Ibid.*, pp. 58–9.

<sup>73</sup> Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, pp. 42–5. The tank may also be seen in these terms. In addition to its cooling and purifying function, its waters are identified with the primordial ocean which perpetually threatens the ordered universe. The Nagore dargah functions as a shore shrine like Tiruccentur: there is an immersion rite at Nagore which is just like those performed in the Tiruccentur utsavams. The primeval ocean is another domain of chaos and violent generative power; the god is born from the sea at the beginning of each new time cycle, and the pilgrim's immersion in its waters produces a spiritual renewal which echoes this divine rebirth. See Clothey, 'Pilgrimage centers in the Tamil cultus of Murukan', p. 91.

another dimension to the pir's identity as a figure of the wilderness, that is as a being who dwells in the domain of chaos and untamed generative power. In the case of Kat Bava and many of the other fierce forest pirs of Tamilnad this view of the saint is expressed in terms of a clearly stated parallel with the figure of Lord Siva as Bhairava 'the terrible' ash-smeared penitent.

In his physical attributes Bhairava the forest wanderer bears a marked resemblance to the wild mazhdubs and qalandar pirs of the non-institutional Sufi tradition. Siva-Bhairava is also the one Hindu god who walks the earth in wholly human form, and this makes him all the more suitable as a parallel figure to the Muslim pir. Bhairava is often closely linked with the figure of the avenging goddess, and the images with which he is associated – blood, bone (the god is portrayed as a gaunt ascetic whose skeleton protrudes through his half-starved frame) the animal skins worn by the *sanyasi* – are often seen as being related to the concept of *māyā*, 'illusion'.

In the Hindu ascetic tradition the wordly concerns of humankind, the body and the senses are all *maya*. In order to achieve release (*moksha*: 'salvation') the god as ascetic shows man how to pierce through and strip away the mere physical body of bone and skin.<sup>74</sup> This notion of divinely-inspired penance and austerity is implicit in many of the south Indian Muslim forest pir traditions: the *Nakaiyantati* poem uses precisely these Hindu terms of reference. The *Nakaiyantati* is suffused with images of anguish and yearning as the poet expresses the devotee's passionate longing for purification and release from his afflictions. In fact the term *maya* (Tam. *māyai*) actually appears in the poem in a series of couplets which describe the heroic austerities through which the devotee may hope to achieve his own release and union with God: through the example and mediation of Shahul Hamid the yearning disciple may hope to strip away his own shell of pain, sin and illusion.

These cult texts are certainly not straightforward hymns of praise. The south Indian Sufi texts and legends are full of blindings, maimings and other acts of destruction wrought by the pir. These episodes of menace and retribution are actually more typical of these biographies than those which portray the saint as a figure of peace and comfort. In many of these accounts the saint chooses victims who clearly merit punishment. It is often those familiar characters the brigands who are blinded for molesting the saint or his suppliants; having endured the saint's just wrath they repent, acknowledge the superior power of the pir, and regain their sight after vowing to embrace Islam.<sup>75</sup> An especially grisly tale of vengeance

<sup>74</sup> Maxwell, 'Mythology of Shiva and the goddess', pp. 213–26.

<sup>75</sup> Tollyayiram Vitaikal, p. 23.

comes in another of the Nathar Wali biographies. Here the sufferer is a Hindu king – identified in the texts as one of the Chola kings of Tamilnad – who has appealed to the saint to cure his wife's infertility. A daughter is duly born to the couple, but they renounce their pledge to offer up the child as Nathar Wali's sworn disciple. The saint therefore brings down his wrath upon them: 'The hands, legs and other organs of the baby were sucked inside its body and it turned into a raw piece of flesh.'<sup>76</sup>

Like the blinding of the brigands this incident is more than a simple parable of justice and retribution: it serves to demonstrate how terrible the activated power of the saint can be, and it also associates the saint with the symbolism of Hindu kingship: the saint is at once master and chastiser of kings and princes, and he is also a recipient of the prestigious royal lustre which comes of identification with Hindu ruling power.<sup>77</sup> In many of these accounts though the characters who suffer such gruesome penalties are not obvious wrongdoers like the king and the dacoits. In such cases the message must be that pain and calamity may result from even the most innocent and accidental contact with the pir and his power. For example the best-known accounts of the founding of the Kat Bava dargah focus on the figure of a Hindu cultivator who is innocently tilling his fields one day when his plough strikes a buried object. Blood spurts from the spot and the farmer is instantly blinded. What has happened is that the ploughman has unwittingly cut into the body of the pir which has been lying hidden underground for countless generations.

This motif of the bleeding pir recurs in many other Tamil cult traditions. There is the Trichy saint Saiyid Zaynu'l-'Abidin: 'The prisoners [possibly the men from the prison near Saiyid Fariduddin Shahid's shrine] who were serving a sentence for theft and murder, were, under the orders of the English, laying out roads. When they came to the spot where the tomb was in existence for the past seventy years, they unknowingly struck against the foot of the saint who was resting there peacefully. Immediately blood began to spout from the spot. When they dug out the earth carefully, they beheld a person dressed in white robes, in a quiescent state.'<sup>78</sup> The account goes on to describe the local notable who learned the saint's name in a dream and built a dargah for him: similar episodes are to be found in the foundation myths of almost every

<sup>76</sup> Sali, *Tamilakattu Tarkakkal*, p. 162.

<sup>77</sup> In the end the parents submit to the will of Nathar Wali. The child is reassembled; it grows up to become one of the saint's disciples, a female pir known as Mama Jikni (*ibid.*). Her grave site is one of several subsidiary shrines within the Nathar Wali dargah.

<sup>78</sup> *Bahar*, p. 60.

south Indian Hindu temple, as well as in the tazkira literature of most south Asian dargahs.<sup>79</sup>

### **Power, heat and the sandal paste ritual**

The motif of the pir's blood also tends to overlap with references to miraculous libations of milk like those which are described in the Nathar Wali texts. These are virtually identical to the images which appear in many Tamil *stalapurana* accounts, and here too there is often the same intermingling of blood and milk: the elements of violence and redemptive purity are both opposed and interlinked.<sup>80</sup> Thus in many Hindu temple myths a *lingam* or some other sacred object lies concealed underground until the same sort of 'accidental' but divinely ordained discovery takes place, thus signifying to the ruler and his subjects that they have been commanded to build a temple on the designated spot. In these Hindu foundation myths the gushing of blood causes those who witness it to be struck down with some malady or to be overcome with paralysing fear and anguish. The spurting of blood is an image of pollution and horror, and the power that has been liberated in this fearful way is to be seen as one of menace and destruction. In the case of the Kat Bava legend with its blinding of the hapless ploughman the message has an unmistakable similarity to that of the region's temple myths. The barakat of the saint is a force which may bring down pain and disaster on anyone who comes into its path. It has the capacity to heal and sanctify, but it may also act on man as a blind and purposeless fury and so must always be channelled and contained.

It is in this sense that the terrible and capricious power of the pir can be seen to correspond to the sakti of the Tamil goddess. In both cases the power of the supernatural being is perceived as a fiery and destructive force as well as a source of healing beneficence. In many Sufi texts these parallels are underlined by a correspondence in language and vocabulary: as has been shown, the activated power of the Muslim saint Nathar Wali is actually referred to as his sakti, just as in the Tamil goddess tradition. The ease with which the concept of sakti can be made to harmonise with the Muslim's understanding of divinity also throws light on the rites of blood sacrifice and possession and on the physical ordeals which have long been common features of south Indian Muslim worship.

European observers were quick to sensationalise this side of Muslim ritual, and to stress its similarity to the worship of south Indian goddesses and power divinities. Thus although most Tamilnad Muslims would

<sup>79</sup> Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, pp. 104–7.

<sup>80</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 93–110.

identify themselves as Sunnis, like other Asian Muslims they have long joined with non-Muslim worshippers in the rites of Mohurram, the great Shia festival of mourning and penitence. This feast commemorates the slaughter of the historic Shia martyrs Ali and Hussain, and in the Carnatic its spectacular penitential processions still attract vast crowds of devotees from all regions and communities. Itinerant ascetics had a particularly important role in festival, and here 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' overlapped in a particularly striking manner. According to an early nineteenth-century account the region's Mohurram rites featured displays of self-mortification by ash-smeared Bhairagis (Saivite sanyasis, holy men) and Nanak Panthis (followers of the teachings of the Sikh gurus) as well as ascetics who belonged to the unorganised mazdhub tradition of Islam – faqirs in beads, bells and bangles, spangled hijras (transvestites), capering trance dancers.<sup>81</sup> The resulting 'tumult' and 'frenzy', and the prominence given to non-Muslims and uncontrolled mazdhubs and holy men in these feasts made the Mohurram a favourite target of purist Sunni 'reformers' in the nineteenth century.<sup>82</sup> Equally objectionable to many critics were the fire-walking ceremonies and other spectacular ordeals in which large numbers of Muslims and Hindus engaged during the festival.

For centuries fire-walking has been one of the key acts of dedication to the goddess, a celebration and a channelling of her fiery sakti: this has been one of the points at which the two traditions have come to meet and intermingle in everyday worship. Colonial observers often commented on the 'mystic weirdness' of south India's Mohurram fire-pit rituals, and on the involvement of Hindu worshippers in Mohurram rites in localities such as Melapalaiyam, Salem and Nellore, and in Muslim centres throughout the Madurai and Ramnad poligar country.

First the musicians, who are Mangalas (barbers) by caste, walk through the fire, and then follow all sorts and conditions of others, both Hindus and Muhammadans. . . The Muhammadan pirs at Gugudu [near Penukonda] are held in great veneration, and all castes, even Brahmans, it is said, make their vows to them, and distribute sugar to the poor, if they are successful in obtaining the object of their desires.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Mahomed Tippoo, 'Observations on the origin and ceremonies of the Mohurram', pp. 321–7 in *MJLS* 9:2 (1835), pp. 315–35.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Account quoted in Thurston, *Ethnographic Notes in Southern India*, pp. 483–4; see also pp. 481–3; J. Welsh, *Military Reminiscences Extracted from a Journal of Nearly Forty Years' Active Service in the East Indies* (London, 1830), II, p. 49; and *Selections from the Records of the Madras Govt. No. VII. Reports on the Swinging Festival, and the Ceremony of Walking through Fire* (Madras, 1854), pp. 9–10, 24–38.

These correspondences constitute more than a mere overlapping of terminology and a basic perception of supernatural power as something which is awesome and dangerous. It will be remembered that the devotees of almost every Muslim cult shrine engage in an annual rite of commemoration in honour of their deceased pirs. These celebrations mark the death anniversary of the saint; they often take the form of elaborate festivals lasting many days and attracting great crowds of participants and onlookers. In much of the subcontinent the term used for these festivals is *urs* – literally marriage – by which is meant the joyful union with God which takes place upon the death of the Sufi.<sup>84</sup>

At some shrines, *urs* ceremonies take the form of sober *mawlid* (eulogies of the Prophet) and Quran recitations. At other Sufi centres *urs* rites have come to feature the parading of ceremonial chariots and cult objects as well as ecstatic dancing, singing and fire-walking, and buffalo and cock sacrifices which are just like those staged at sakti goddess shrines; all these, and many other ‘superstitious’ or ‘un-Islamic’ acts and practices have been condemned by the so-called Islamic purists. In the Tamil country *kanturi* rather than *urs* is the term used most frequently for these festivals, and over many centuries the Muslims of Tamilnad have evolved their own distinctive variant of the Sufi death anniversary commemoration. The details have varied from shrine to shrine, but in most Sufi establishments in the region the central act of the *kanturi* has been a set of rituals known as the *santanakkuttam* or sandalwood paste anointing.

As the name implies, this involves the ceremonial conveyance of pots of sandalwood paste to the tomb of the saint; the participants then anoint the grave site with the sandalwood paste and distribute the sandal as well as propitious substances such as rock sugar, *malida* (sugared bread) or rose petals to the massed crowds. These rites can be observed today at almost every Tamil dargah; they were an established feature of the region’s cult shrines in the pre-colonial period and were observed by a number of European and Indian travellers. In his report of c. 1823, the British surveyor Thomas Turnbull describes the cult activities

<sup>84</sup> Some texts reverse the motifs of misogyny and renunciation which pervade Sufi lore. A Walahjah poet (fl. 1810–18) portrays the ascetic as a powerhouse of sexual energy and his death as an erotic fulfilment. One of his works describes ‘the pangs of love of...a faqir, living in a temple [*sic*] on the top of a mountain in Punjab for...a married beautiful lady, who passed by this lover carelessly and then returned to him and found him dead. She opened his coffin and lay down with him. They were so united that nobody could separate them from each other.’ Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, p. 267. In his account of 1832 Ja’far Sharif recorded a gruesome little miracle story about the Nagore pir removing and then restoring the breasts of a woman devotee: the tale makes the saint a renouncer and a figure of divine fecundity at the same time. *Qanun-i-Islam*, p. 199.

surrounding one of the Tamilnad's most powerful healing shrines, the seventeenth-century dargah of the pir Shaikh Moyiuddin at Pottapudur. Just as at the festival of a south Indian goddess, the Pottapudur kanturi included a rite of animal sacrifice, and there was even a distribution of ceremonially ranked 'honours', with the meat being divided in shares between ritualists and devotees. The climax of the festival was a classic south Indian santanakkuttam. This was a rite which transcended formal communal boundaries: the pot of sacred sandalwood paste was carried in procession to the shrine from the nearby village of Ravanasamudaram, a locality inhabited by Hindu caste groups and containing the usual array of goddess shrines and 'high' Hindu temples.<sup>85</sup>

The significance of the santanakkuttam ritual will be clear to anyone with experience of Hindu ritual activity. Throughout the subcontinent sandalwood paste is one of the most highly prized of all sacred substances; it has been used since ancient times in domestic and temple ceremonies. For Hindus, the importance of sandalwood paste is that it is perceived as possessing inherent cooling qualities. In the systems of indigenous medicine practised in Tamilnad, for example, the substance is applied as a remedy for skin eruptions and other 'heating' disorders: 'the wood in powder is given by the native physicians in ardent remitting fevers, and is supposed to be sedative and cooling; with milk it is also prescribed in gonorrhoea'.<sup>86</sup> Like many traditional curing agents sandalwood paste does appear to have medicinal properties, and it really can be used to relieve irritations of the skin. More importantly, Tamil Hindus (or those now identified as Hindus) perceive disorders such as boils and rashes as manifestations of the goddess's fiery anger. To be healed of these diseases the sufferer must appease the goddess; he must cool her sakti and seek to contain the destructive energies which have brought on the fever or smallpox. Thus in time of disease or calamity, Tamil devotees apply sandalwood paste to the goddess's shrine or sacred emblem. Such offerings are costly and should therefore please the goddess; her wrath will be cooled, her sakti contained and thus an end will be put to the pain and suffering she has caused.<sup>87</sup>

Indian Muslims also use sandalwood paste both as a medicinal agent and as an adjunct to their own specifically 'Islamic' religious rites. In the

<sup>85</sup> See e.g. Ja'far Sharif on the santanakkuttam, *Quanan-i-Islam*, p. 197. On the use of the term kanturi in south and southeast Asia, see *The Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition*, IV (Leiden, 1978), p. 540; also Turnbull, 'Memoir', pp. 55-6; and Pate, *Tinnevely*, p. 360.

<sup>86</sup> Balfour, *Cyclopaedia*, V, p. S-115.

<sup>87</sup> D.B. McGilvray, 'Sexual power and fertility in Sri Lanka', p. 30, in C.P. MacCormack, ed., *Ethnography of Fertility and Birth* (London, 1982), pp. 25-73. On the use of sandal paste in Tamil goddess worship see e.g. Narasinga Rao, 'Village Deities', p. 116 [from observations made in 1907].

*Qanun-i-Islam*, a classic account of Deccani Muslim social and religious life during the early nineteenth century, the author notes that the Muslims of his day marked the *Bara Wafat*, the anniversary of the Prophet's death, by carrying cups of sandalwood paste mounted on images of the Prophet's mythical steed Buraq: the paste was then applied to emblems of the Prophet's footprint which many households possessed as objects of veneration.<sup>88</sup> The *Qanun-i-Islam* also points out that the use of sandalwood products in Muslim healing rituals bore many similarities to the rites followed by south Indian Hindus. For example the author describes the cult of the great saint known as Pir-i-dastagir or Piran-i-pir ('chief of pirs') whose flag bearing the imprint of a hand or *panja* in sandalwood paste was paraded through the town 'when cholera or any plague is raging'.<sup>89</sup>

In the Muslim kanturi festivals of Tamilnad, the anointment of the saint's tomb with sandalwood paste has long been perceived as an act which cools and contains the fearful punitive force of the pir's barakat, precisely as the application of sandal soothes and damps down the destructive sakti of the Tamil goddess. Throughout the Tamil country these beliefs came to be held by formally professing Muslims as well as those who would now be classed as Hindus. One indication of this is the ardent participation of both Hindus and Muslims (or people who came to be identified with one or other formal communal affiliation) in the enactment of the santanakuttam. It is a commonplace to observe that the great crowds of onlookers at Sufi death-anniversary festivals have tended to include members of almost every social and religious community in the region: the same is true all over India. But at the Tamil kanturi this overlapping has gone far beyond a mixing of casual bystanders. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the leading roles in the sandal anointment rituals of many great shrines were being shared between élite Muslim pirzada lineages and representatives of important local Hindu caste groups and communities.

At the great dargahs of Trichy, the pirzada families who preside over these foundations take pride in the fact that for over 200 years important Hindu groups such as the chief merchants of the local bazaar have held the right to present their own pots of sandalwood paste every year at the kanturi. The hereditary guardians and trustees of these shrines – including scholars who possess a thorough grounding in the disciplines of 'mainline' intellectual Sufism – are at pains to point out that

<sup>88</sup> Ja'far Sharif, *Qanun-i-Islam*, pp. 188–9; see also pp. 54, 210, 213, 216.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 192–3. The cult saint Pir-i-dastagir is the eleventh to twelfth-century Sufi master Abdul-qadir Jilani who is venerated throughout the Muslim world as the founder of the Qadiri tariqa.

the preparation and offering of the sandalwood vessel constitutes a cherished ceremonial privilege for Hindus and Muslims alike.

Clearly then it cannot be said that the *santanakuttam* is a 'debased' or 'superstitious' or 'Hinduised' practice in which the *pirzadas* unwillingly acquiesce. Nor is it a rite which is indulged in largely by Hindus or, as some Islamists might assume, only by poor and uneducated Muslims and by persons connected with small and unimportant 'fringe' shrines. On the contrary, the *pirzadas* who refer with such pride to the sandalwood rite and to the dual participation of Hindus and Muslims in the *kanturi* include the heads of lineages who control some of the largest and most prestigious *dargahs* in south India. Many of these *pirzadas* belong to eminent *marakkayar* lineages, but there are others who come from powerful Tamilnad-based *Dakhni* families: this is not a phenomenon which can be dismissed as a corrupt or 'Tamilised' aberration. Whatever their linguistic origins, all these *pirzada* lineages see themselves as upholders of the highest traditions of Islamic learning: they recognise no conflict between their commitment to Muslim high culture and their enthusiastic participation in the *kanturi* with its basis in a broad and inclusive south Indian religious culture.

The *Nathar Wali dargah* in Trichy has long been the site of a particularly elaborate annual *kanturi*.<sup>90</sup> At this shrine the first pot of sandalwood paste to be conveyed to the tomb is the vessel prepared by the *pirzadas*. This is followed by a pot which is prepared by the locality's leading Hindu commercial families; these *Chettiar* merchants bring the vessel with great ceremony from the main bazaar to the shrine. At Nagore the elaborate *kanturi* for *Shahul Hamid* lasts for fourteen days and has been enacted by the *pirzadas* since the early eighteenth century. The links with the wider local religious tradition are particularly clear in this shrine's festivals. The vessels of sandalwood paste used in the Nagore *santanakuttam* are borne to the saint's tomb on a decorated wooden chariot which closely resembles those used in the great Hindu processional festivals of Tamilnad. The *dargah's* publications even use the term 'ter' to describe these vehicles; the same word is used for the processional vehicles at Hindu *utsavam* festivals.

Since the early nineteenth century (and probably for much longer) the Nagore *kanturi* has also included rites of veneration before one of the living saints or *faqirs* who take part in commemoration festivals at most of south India's important Muslim cult sites. In 1823 the author of the *Bahar-i-A'Zam Jahi* described the Nagore *faqir* who would sit fasting on

<sup>90</sup> On the finances of the *Nathar Wali kanturi*, see Collec. to BOR, 13 Dec. 1843/BOR vol. 1898/8 Jan. 1844/31-2/pp. 693-6/TNA.

a cushion during the kanturi while a pre-pubescent boy fanned him with a royal peacock wand. It was customary to break a pot of milk-rice before the faqir; after he drank some of the mixture, the worshippers would rush forward to consume the rest just as the devotees of a bhakti sect ingest the sanctified leavings (often the same milk-rice mixture) of their guru.<sup>91</sup> Devotees of the Pudukkottai pir Kat Bava made similar oblations: preparations of curd, cooked fowl and *roti* (bread) were consecrated with prayer and then distributed to his disciples.<sup>92</sup>

Elsewhere in Tamilnad the tomb shrines of Sufis who represent the highest traditions of élite learning and culture have long sponsored kanturi ceremonies of precisely this type. This is true for example of the important Madras dargah which contains the tomb of the eighteenth-century literary Sufi Maulana Abd al-Ali Bahr al-Ulum (1731–1810). This mystic and literary man from the celebrated Lucknow Sufi teaching foundation known as Firangi Mahal was a leading figure at the court of the Walahjah nawabs. At his tomb shrine the pirzadas simply set the two seemingly contradictory traditions of Muslim worship side by side. The first day of Bahr al-Ulum's death-anniversary celebrations takes the form of restrained north Indian-style mawlid and Quran recitations without music or processions. On the second day however there is a full-scale Tamil-style santanakuttam: these two events are seen to be complementary and mutually reinforcing.<sup>93</sup>

There is an objection which might be raised at this point. Thus far what has been suggested is that most south Indians came to share a common perception of sacred power, and that these shared religious traditions cut across formal boundaries of community and sectarian affiliation. A conventional 'Islamist' might argue that such conclusions derive from observations of what worshippers *do* rather than what they think and believe. It is not even important that these acts are then explained and interpreted by élite pirzadas and other authorities, as in the case of the Tamil pirzadas' accounts of the santanakuttam rites which they share with local Hindus. What really matters, the Islamist would say, is the actual content of the individual's faith and not superficial details of his behaviour. This is why there has been such an insistence on exploring Muslim societies by means of the written word: Islam lives and

<sup>91</sup> *Bahar*, pp. 28–30. This is also described by Ja'far Sharif, *Qanun-i-Islam*, pp. 197–8.

<sup>92</sup> Ja'far Sharif, *Qanun-i-Islam*, p. 135.

<sup>93</sup> Visits to Bahr al-Ulum tomb shrine, Madras, Jan. 1983. See N. Ahmed Basha, 'Bahrul Uloom. His life and works', M.Litt. thesis, University of Madras, 1981. Dr Francis Robinson is currently engaged in research on the Sufis and ulama of Firangi Mahal. See 'The Ulama of Firangi Mahall and their Adab', in Barbara Daly Metcalf, ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority. The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 152–83.

perpetuates itself as a systematic tradition through the written declarations of its believers. But if it really is the text which provides the clue to the Muslim's religious world, it is fortunate that the south Indian pir cult tradition has generated such a rich array of textual source material, and even more fortunate that this biographical and devotional lore is so explicit in its accounts of the destructive power of the south Indian pir or antavar.

These texts represent the written declarations of accomplished literati: they are the sources which the Islamist would recognise as the 'true' repository of faith and understanding in a society of Muslim believers. This is why it is so notable that in anecdote after anecdote in the south Indian devotional literature, the saints of Tamilnad are directly associated with 'heating' and eruptive diseases and particularly with skin complaints and fever-producing illnesses such as cholera. Sometimes the saint merely performs an act of healing in these accounts. The sufferer is often a member of a Hindu ruling house; he will be struck down with leprosy, smallpox, cholera or 'fever' and then cured when he throws himself on the mercy of the pir. Alternatively the chronicler simply portrays the saint as a kind of guardian and mediator acting in perpetual defence of his devotees: 'whenever smallpox came to Karaikkal, Kappada Sahibu Valiullah [one of the pirs of Karaikkal] saved the people from the disease by praying to the Lord'. (The pir's name comes from Tam. *kapadam*: guard, defence.)<sup>94</sup>

While this saint is described in relatively benign terms, most of the text's disease stories show the saint as a harsh and punitive figure. Just like the Tamil goddess, the Muslim antavar is both a bringer and a healer of disease. In exercising his supernatural power he is first shown bringing affliction to some hapless victim: only later does he accept the sufferer's repentance and devotion and relieve his pain and distress. In the case of one of the many other saints of Karaikkal for example the sufferer is the brother of the famous seventeenth-century ruler Tirumalai Nayaka (1623–59: referred to as 'Tirumalai rayyan' in the text).<sup>95</sup> In this account the young prince comes upon the Karaikkal pir when the saint is in a state of trance-like meditation and therefore fails to make his *salaams* to the prince. The young man is enraged; he strikes the saint with his whip and is immediately overcome with an intolerable burning skin irritation.

<sup>94</sup> Note that Karaikkal is one of the proudly 'Islamic' *maraiikkayar* towns of the Tamil coastal region. Sali, *Tamilakattu Tarkakkal*, p. 77. The Papavur pir Shaikh Alavuddin [*sic*] Valiyullah is best known for his miraculous leprosy cures. He is said to have cured the son-in-law of a Hindu temple trustee; local devotees point out the nearby temple where the miracle is supposed to have taken place. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75–6.

Eventually the youth repents and begs for relief, and so, the text says,

Waliullah took his stick and ran it over the prince's body. At once he was cured and felt a wonderful cooling sensation. From that day the king and everyone else called the saint by the name of Kulumai Sahib ['lord of coolness'] and the place where he was meditating was given to him for his place of abode.<sup>96</sup>

In this account of the Karaikkal pir, the parallels with the tradition of the Tamil amman (goddess) are particularly clear. There is the same equation of cooling and healing on the one hand, and of pain, heat, disease and fiery supernatural anger on the other. The name by which the saint is known is suggestive as well. According to local tradition, the pir originally bore the conventional Arabic name Gul Muhammad. Gul would be rendered into Tamil as *kul*; because of the similarity of sound, the Tamilised '*Kul Muhammadu pir*' would inevitably suggest a connection with the concept of *kulumai*, coolness. Thus Gul Muhammad becomes a typical Tamil cult saint Kulumai Sahib, with a suitable biographical legend stressing his power to generate fiery afflictions and torment as well as his capacity to soothe or cool them.<sup>97</sup>

Even when these saints are not explicitly described in the biographies and miracle literature as agents of retribution and disease, they are still presented as figures of power, and particularly as warriors, avengers and awesome kings. In some of the texts the saint is not merely the chastiser of royal personages but the recipient of the Hindu king's honours and emblems. Thus in an account of the Muttupet pir, Shaikh Daud Waliullah, the state elephant of one of the seventeenth-century nayaka rulers of Tanjavur visits the saint to offer him homage as he reposes in his khanaqah; the ruler is so struck by this that he then presents himself at the saint's shrine and offers his respects.<sup>98</sup> Another tradition recounts that whenever cholera threatens the vicinity of Kulumai Sahib's dargah at Karaikkal, the saint mounts a horse and rides out to drive the disease away, shouting out '*cholo*'! (go! in Hindi or Hindustani). This is typical of the vivid visual imagery which is used to evoke the power and majesty of the saints of Tamilnad. The image of the saint as a mounted warrior invites comparison with the figure of the Tamil horseman deity Aiyanar. The use of Hindi or Hindustani – the language of northerners, of military

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76. The saint's meditation takes place beneath a tamarind tree. (Tamarind too has cooling properties.) Salt and pepper, which are often presented to the Tamil goddesses, are among the other cooling substances which are prominent in the region's pir cults. One Muslim saint with a dargah in eastern Ramnad is known to his devotees as 'Milagu Sahib' – 'Pepper Lord'. His powers are invoked to cure 'hot' complaints such as boils and scabies; sufferers offer handfuls of pepper at his shrine. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

men and service people from the former Mughal heartland – serves to link the saint to a tradition of armed power and historical Muslim conquest and dominion. As will be seen in chapter 5, the notion of the saint as a martial figure, an avenging hero and real-life military man riding against a demonic enemy, was to become a particularly powerful element of the south Indian devotional tradition during the later pre-colonial period.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

## *The south Indian state and the creation of Muslim community*

### **Nawabi rule in Tamilnad**

Having looked at the traditions of south Indian Muslim worship which came into being by the beginning of the eighteenth-century, chapters 4 and 5 will show how the various linguistic and status groups who shared in this tradition began to be reshaped into a more formally defined community of Muslim believers. Although the south was never fully 'Islamised', the creation of this limited sense of community was largely due to the rise of the region's first Muslim-ruled state, the nawabi of Arcot (also known as the Carnatic) with its two successive lines of would-be dynasts.

It will be remembered that the first of these two lines of nawabs belonged to an élite population of Dakhni trading and service people, the Navaiyats. The most powerful members of this group were those who had held high posts under the sultans of Bijapur and the other Deccani Muslim states. When these domains came under Mughal rule at the end of the seventeenth century, many leading Dakhnis were able to seek preferment within the imperial service system. For most of these gentry families the crucial opening came at the beginning of the eighteenth century when the whole of the Tamil country (the Payanghat or 'Lower Carnatic', that is the region 'below the Ghats' from Nellore to Kanniyakumari) was declared a *subah* or province of the Mughal empire. In theory the new subah was subject to the adjacent Mughal province of Hyderabad which had been annexed after the conquest of Golkonda in the 1680s. Here, too, a line of imperial office-holders, the Nizams of Hyderabad, had begun to carve out an independent dynastic base.

In 1710, when the Mughals had secured the line of fortress sites which held the key to power in the Tamil country, the post of *subāhdār* or chief military and revenue officer of the new Carnatic territory went to a Navaiyat military man named Saadatullah Khan (1651–1732). Six years earlier, Saadatullah Khan's brother had been named *qilādār* (fortress commander) of Vellore, the town whose Maratha-built citadel was known as the strongest fortified site in the Carnatic; his nephew, Baqir Ali

Khan (d. 1739), succeeded him in this post in 1716.<sup>1</sup> Saadatullah Khan and his successors had much in common with the other eighteenth-century strongmen who sought to make the leap from provincial office-holding to independent dynastic rule within the Mughal (or nominally Mughal) territories of the sub-continent. It was this process of hard-fought state formation which gave rise to the new regional powers of the eighteenth century. Of these Bengal, Awadh and Hyderabad are the most familiar examples, but the new southern states of Mysore and Travancore conformed to this pattern as well.<sup>2</sup> In many ways the Carnatic was an ideal setting for the construction of a Mughal 'successor' regime: the subah was a new and unstable frontier zone, and despite the presence of Mughal garrisons and revenue takers in the region, it had never acquired secure links to the imperial centre.

The new lineage employed techniques of statecraft which were much like those being used to launch the new regimes of north India and the Deccan. Saadatullah Khan and his kinsmen intermarried with the region's other powerful Navaiyat settler clans, and this web of family and marital ties served as one of the main cornerstones of Navaiyat power over the next 40 years. In addition, like the aspiring rulers of Awadh, Bengal and the southern states, the Navaiyats were ambitious town-builders. The aim here was to build up an economic base for the new regime; this in turn would finance the necessary expansion of the nawabi's fortress and market centres. By the 1720s Saadatullah Khan had begun to extend existing citadels and strong-points such as Vellore and Gingi. He recruited new groups of artisans, traders and military men to these fort towns – his recruits included large numbers of Pathan mercenaries from north India and the Deccan – and he made large-scale expenditures on fortifications and on the building of mosques, *idgahs* (prayer enclosures for the annual *id* festival) and other pious foundations in these localities. In addition the Navaiyats founded new *ganjs* or market centres, as for

<sup>1</sup> When the Mughal forces first moved into the Carnatic a Pathan military man, Daud Khan, was appointed *naib* (1700–8). His headquarters was at Jinji; Saadatullah Khan was his deputy. See Muhammad Husayn Nainar, ed., *Tuzak-i-Walahjahi of Burhan Ibn Hasan* (hereafter *Tuzak*) Part 1, pp. 57, 63–4; N.S. Ramaswami, *Political History of Carnatic Under the Nawabs* (New Delhi, 1984), p. 15; Orme, *A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan*, I, pp. 35–7.

<sup>2</sup> C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars. North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 25–7, 35–72; Richard Barnett, *North India Between Empires. Awadh, the Mughals and the British 1720–1801* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 240–52; Karen Leonard, 'The Hyderabad political system and its participants', *JAS* 30 (1971), pp. 569–82; P. Calkins, 'The formation of a regionally orientated ruling group in Bengal 1700–40', *JAS* 29 (1970), pp. 799–806.

example at Saadatnagar (1714), Fattahnagar (1715) and Saadatpattan (1718).<sup>3</sup>

Having been vested with the more prestigious Mughal title 'nawab', the new line also sought to turn their seat at Arcot into a true princely capital. Palatial residences were built: no new line could hope to secure a claim to power and authority without investing in the material trappings of kingship. It was also accepted throughout the Indo-Islamic world that the seat of a true dynastic ruler must possess its own Islamic court culture. This might have seemed an unduly ambitious aim for a rough garrison town like Arcot. In fact, Saadatullah Khan and his successors were surprisingly successful in attracting poets, scholars and Sufis to their new capital, largely because they were able to benefit from the disruption of patronage at other Muslim court centres. Many of Saadatullah Khan's learned and holy men came from the declining courts of the Deccan, while others were refugees from the factional conflicts which overtook Delhi after the death of the emperor Aurangzeb in 1707.<sup>4</sup>

While all of the nawab's power bases received an influx of Deccani and north Indian luminaries in this period, it was the citadel town of Vellore which acquired the most important of these new literary figures. In about 1725 the Bijapuri Qadiri Sufi Saiyid Shah Abdul Lateef (1656–1736) took up residence in Vellore: the khanaqah (hospice) which he established grew into that most celebrated of south Indian Sufi institutions, the Lateefia madrasa and dargah complex now known as the Hazarat Makan of Vellore (see above, chapter 3, p. 114). As for the emergence of Arcot as a centre of learning, the nawabs had formed a considerable circle of poets and scholars at their court as early as 1720. By 1722 Saadatullah Khan was able to commission one of these literary men (a Punjabi Hindu named Juswant Rai) to compose a Persian chronicle on the rise of Navaayat power in the Carnatic. Like the *Anwar-nama* which Muhammad Ali Walahjah commissioned from one of his court literati in 1769, this work the *Sayeed-nama* was modelled on Firdausi's classic Persian chronicle the *Shahnama*, and on the great sixteenth-century Mughal dynastic chronicle, the *Akbarnama*. This was a key move in the assertion of independent dynastic authority. A court chronicle set the seal on the would-be ruler's achievement; its formulae were familiar to all who knew the conventions of Mughal court culture, and since it talked in terms of

<sup>3</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, p. 17. On the founding of Saadatnagar and the importance of Hindu Chettiar merchants in its development, see S.A.R. Bukhari, 'The Carnatic under the Nawabs as revealed through the Sayeed Nama of Juswant Rai', M. Litt. thesis, University of Madras, 1965, p. 208.

<sup>4</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, p. 14. In 1752 at the time of Muhammad Ali's confrontation with Chanda Sahib, Arcot was said to have a sizeable garrison, a population of 100,000 and a thriving textile industry. Ramaswami, *Political History*, p. 157.

reigns and glorious ruling power, the man it honoured might hope to be identified as a dynast and not a mere adventurer.<sup>5</sup>

There was no real distinction between the political aspirations of these rulers and their attempts to foster a tradition of Islamic high culture within their new realm. This was also true of the building programme which the Navaiyats sponsored in their new towns and strongholds. The fortress town of Vellore became renowned as a resort of Sufis, a repository of sacred barakat and a military and strategic base for the nawabi, and so too the domain's capital of Arcot (a town without any natural defences) was adorned with princely residences and dynastic monuments, and also with an impressive array of religious foundations. Saadatullah Khan and his successors endowed Arcot with mosques, dargahs and family tombs, and with another of the great idgahs which were such a feature of the Muslim towns of Tamilnad.<sup>6</sup> It was in this period that the capital acquired the nickname 'Shahjahanabad the small'. (Shahjahanabad was the official name of the Mughal capital at Delhi.) The nickname certainly exaggerates the town's size and grandeur, but it is an accurate reflection of the Navaiyats' dynastic ambitions.<sup>7</sup>

The story of the Navaiyats ends rather anti-climactically. In 1740 Saadatullah Khan's successor Dost Ali Khan was killed in battle, campaigning against a 10,000-man Maratha invasion force. Dost Ali Khan's son was forced to abandon his 'open and defenceless' seat at 'Shahjahanabad the small'; he scrambled to take refuge in Vellore and was murdered there in 1742 by another Navaiyat notable, his cousin and brother-in-law the Vellore fortress qiladar (commander).<sup>8</sup> At this point the new lord of Hyderabad took the initiative. In 1743 the Nizam-ul-mulk Asaf Jah marched into Arcot with a force of 280,000 men, and the Marathas soon evacuated all their positions in the Carnatic. In theory the nawabi had passed to the young son of the murdered Navaiyat nawab, but the Nizam claimed to have found a wild free-for-all with any number of would-be nawabs battling for the succession.

Nizam-al-muluck [*sic*] was struck with amazement at the anarchy which prevailed [in Arcot]. . . Every governor of a fort, and every commander of a district, had assumed the title of Nabob [nawab], and had given to the officers of

<sup>5</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 14–31; 115–30; Bukhari, 'The Carnatic under the Nawabs'.

<sup>6</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Bahar*, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> Orme, *Indostan*, I, pp. 46–8; *Tuzak*, I, pp. 77, 110–11. The assassins were also backed by the many Pathan military men who had settled in Arcot and Vellore under Daud Khan; their pay was in arrears and the nawab had failed to settle their claims.

his retinue the same names as distinguished the persons who held the most considerable employments in the court of the Soubah.<sup>9</sup>

Faced with this spectacle of 'anarchy' the nizam now had an ideal pretext for stepping in and appointing a retainer of his own as subahdar-nawab. This in itself was an assertion of dominion: it was the sort of move by which all the other would-be dynasts in the sub-continent were seeking to create their own independent networks of alliance and affiliation, and it corresponded to the lines of validation and endorsement which were still being set up between south India's petty warrior chiefs and their self-proclaimed overlords or 'little kings'. As it happened, the Nizam's first nominee was poisoned; the next man to hold the post was a north Indian soldier-adventurer named Anwaruddin Khan (c. 1674–1749). This new lord of Arcot succeeded to the nawabi in 1744.<sup>10</sup>

Anwaruddin Khan and his successors survived to found the second of the two lines of nawabs who held power in the Carnatic. This new line – soon to be known as the Walahjabs – was responsible for bringing yet another influx of service people into the Tamil country. This new Urdu-speaking élite included Muslim jurists, mystics and literary men as well as soldiers and government service people; many of them were north Indian *qasbah* gentry like the Walahjabs themselves. Anwaruddin Khan's army commander Muhammad Najib Khan was typical of these migrants. Like other Muslim service people who held posts under the Walahjabs, this key military figure is remembered as an accomplished Sufi poet and scholar as well as a soldier. (He claimed descent from the eminent thirteenth-century Chishti saint Shaikh Hamidu'd-Din whose khanaqah was located at Nagaur in Rajasthan.) Muhammad Najib Khan and his descendants patronised shrines and learned foundations in the south and developed close ties to many of the region's leading Sufi institutions. Elite Muslim literati like the Sufis of Hazarat Makan were fulsome in their tributes to these martial service lineages. As the following chapters will show, this was only one of many ways in which the world of the Sufi and the world of the Muslim military man came to intersect in the nawabi period.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Orme, *Indostan*, I, p. 50–1. The Nizam was said to have counted eighteen petty lords and fortress commanders all claiming title to the nawabi; at one point, it is said, he threatened to scourge the next man who presumed to call himself nawab in his presence. *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> The last Navaiyat claimant to the nawabi was the child nawab Saiyyid Muhammad Khan. In 1744 he was hacked to death at Arcot in the presence of Anwaruddin Khan; the assassins were Pathan military men from the Arcot garrison. *Tuzak*, I, pp. 110–11.

<sup>11</sup> The most distinguished of the Vellore Hazarat Makan literary Sufis (Syed Shah Abdul Lateef Zawqi, 1738–89) composed a grandiloquent Persian *mathnawi* on the life of Muhammad Najib Khan. Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 86, 147. Another of

The brief career of Anwaruddin Khan can be seen as a transitional stage in the development of a Muslim political tradition in the Carnatic. The Anglo-French war of 1744–8 brought a massive influx of European troops to the Carnatic. The British and French now held the balance of military power in the region, and this made it vital for the new nawabi regime to establish a presence in Madras. This was all the more important as there was now a sizeable Muslim population in this colonial port city – Pathan military and trading people, Labbais and maraikkayars from southern Tamilnad acting as agents for the East India Company, weavers and other artisans from the Deccan and the northern Tamil districts. This may explain why much of Anwaruddin Khan's religious patronage was focused on Madras: the *masjid-o-Anwari* which he built in the mid-1740s served as the city's congregational mosque until 1847. His son Mahfuz Khan (1714–78) also directed acts of conspicuous piety towards the Muslim commercial and artisan populations of Madras: for example he built the graceful Mahfuz Khan Bagh *masjid* in the trading quarter of 'Blacktown' (now Georgetown).<sup>12</sup>

Anwaruddin Khan died in 1749 at the fort of Ambur (fifty miles west of Arcot) fighting against the last of south India's great Navaiyat military men. This was the celebrated 'Chanda Sahib' (Shams-ud-daula Husain Dost Khan). Chanda Sahib was another of those larger-than-life warriors who figured so dramatically in the political history of Tamilnad. His enemies reviled him as the 'scourge of the Carnatic'; to his contemporary, the military historian Robert Orme, he was 'the ablest soldier that had of late years appeared in the Carnatic', and before his death in 1752 he came close to founding his own dynastic state in the Tamil country.<sup>13</sup> In 1736 this 'renegade' member of the lineage used his 15,000-man army to take control of the great rock fortress at Trichy, headquarters of the Hindu nayaka lineage who had ruled in southern Tamilnad since the 1560s. Chanda Sahib gave his two brothers command of the key citadels of

these soldier-literati was Saiyid Muhammad Musawi Waleh (d. 1770): this Persian and Arabic Sufi poet was known as the first nawabi officer to wear a European-style army uniform. *Ibid.*, p. 163. And see *Tuzak*, I, pp. 108–9; Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India* (2 vols., New Delhi, 1978–83), II, pp. 99, 315, 433.

<sup>12</sup> On the build-up of European forces, see P.J. Marshall, 'British expansion in India in the eighteenth century: a historical revision', *History* 60: 198 (1975), pp. 28–43. One of the mosques which dates from this period is said to have been built by a Hindu Komati named 'Kasi Viranna' who was the Company's chief commercial agent in Madras. M.G. Muhammad Ali Marakkayar, 'A note on Marakkayars in Madras', in *The Madras Tercentenary Commemoration Volume* (Madras, 1939), pp. 65–6; Wheeler, *Madras in Olden Time*, II, pp. 67, 224–5.

<sup>13</sup> Orme, *Indostan*, I, p. 119; *Tuzak*, II, pp. 30–126. Chanda Sahib was a nephew of the first Navaiyat nawab Saadatullah Khan. In 1734 he deposed the ruling nayaka rani Minaksi (1732–6) and declared himself nawab. K. Rajayyan, *History of Madurai (1736–1801)* (Madurai, 1974), pp. 67–70; *Tuzak*, I, p. 72; Orme, *Indostan*, I, pp. 38–9.

Madurai and Dindigul; he then proclaimed himself heir and successor to the Hindu nayaka regime, and began to carve out an independent domain in defiance of the nawab's claim to suzerainty over these ex-nayaka domains.

The Maratha invasion force overran Trichy in 1741; the other two brothers were killed, and the Marathas carried Chanda Sahib off to their Maharashtrian stronghold at Satara. In 1749 Chanda Sahib marched back to the Carnatic at the head of a 40,000-man army: this military confederacy was sponsored by one of the contenders in the other great power struggle of the period, the battle over succession to the nizamate. When Chanda Sahib faced the nawab's force at Ambur, Anwaruddin Khan had a new European-trained army of 20,000 men with sixty European mercenaries to man his artillery. This investment in the new accoutrements of eighteenth-century warfare might have paid off except that Chanda Sahib had been sent a force of French soldiers and sepoys from Pondichery.<sup>14</sup>

In the end it was the British-backed candidate who emerged as the new ruler of Hyderabad. Chanda Sahib lost out too: three years after his victory at Ambur he was defeated at Trichy by a joint force of Company sepoys and troops serving Muhammad Ali and his new-found ally the Maratha raja of Tanjore. Thus the unexpected outcome of all these death struggles was that Anwaruddin Khan's son Muhammad Ali (1722–95), took the title Muhammad Ali Walajah I and ruled as nawab of Arcot for the next forty-six years. His descendants maintained their status as hereditary nawabs for over a century, although their dependence on British arms and finance soon began to rob the nawabs of their credibility as independent sovereign lords. The domain was transformed into a semi-dependent client of the colonial power long before the state was formally absorbed into the Madras Presidency in 1855.

There are three distinct phases in the development of the nawabi as a political system. First, there is the period from 1749 to 1766 when Muhammad Ali was fighting to establish his authority, and the new regime was based precariously in the military strongholds of southern and central Tamilnad. In this period the high costs of the nawab's military partnership with the East India Company were already pushing him into debt, but the realm was still managing to expand its networks of revenue and alliance. The second stage began in 1766 when the nawab moved his court to Madras and set about the delicate task of creating a Muslim dynastic tradition within the debilitating embrace of his English spon-

<sup>14</sup> *Tuzak*, I, pp. 137–8. See Orme, *Indostan*, I, p. 127 on Anwaruddin Khan's 'reform' of his 'undisciplined rabble' of soldiery: he managed to create a 'well-appointed army' of 12,000 cavalry and 8,000 infantry.

sors.<sup>15</sup> During the third stage, the nawabi began to show signs of the decay which was appearing at other Indian Muslim court centres in the early nineteenth-century. This stage can be dated from 1801 when the British overturned the established line of succession to the nawabi and proclaimed as nawab a more pliant and politically acceptable member of the lineage. Paradoxically this period of political decline was also the era in which the court attained its greatest level of lavishness and princely ceremonial.

### **The first phase of Walahjah rule in the Carnatic**

Like most other Indian Muslim 'successor' states, the Carnatic remained a Mughal province throughout the eighteenth-century. It is true that imperial rule became little more than a fiction in this period, but even so the attempt to create an independent dynastic state within these provincial domains could still be perceived as an act of sedition, and the nawabs as usurpers in rebellion against their legitimate Mughal overlords. The status of these aspiring rulers was all the more uncertain because they had originally come to power as clients and appointees of the nizams. Since these Hyderabad rulers had also cut themselves adrift from the Mughal centre, the nawabs would have to be seen as 'rebel' dependants of overlords who were 'rebels' themselves: such a situation does not fit into any conventional western notions of state power and sovereignty.<sup>16</sup>

For the Muslim world at large the whole concept of political legitimacy has always been problematic. Ideally Muslims are all united within the *umma*, the universal community or 'invisible theocracy' of Islam, and the existence of secular rulers – even if these are Muslims – is necessary only because human society has failed to live up to this ideal of perfection.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, if Muslim kingship is itself an uncertain and morally ambiguous institution (at least in the 'high' or orthodox Sunni tradition) the practice of statecraft in the Muslim world has also depended upon a much more open-ended concept of sovereignty than can be ac-

<sup>15</sup> In 1767 the nawab was forced to surrender the revenues of a key region, the jagir of Chingleput, so that he could meet the costs of the Company's assistance in the campaign against Chanda Sahib. This process was to be repeated many times in the course of Muhammad Ali's relations with the British. K. Rajayyan, *History of Tamil Nadu 1565–1982* (Madurai, 1982), p. 195.

<sup>16</sup> Sunil Chander rejects the view of Hyderabad as a cohesive 'successor' regime. See his 'From a pre-colonial order to a princely state: Hyderabad in transition c. 1748–1865', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1987. On the Walahjahs' claims to be legitimate Mughal 'successors' see K. Rajayyan, *Tamil Nadu*, p. 109, note 12.

<sup>17</sup> André Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India*, pp. 21–34.

commodated within the traditions of European political theory. Throughout India, or at least in any Indian state with experience of Muslim rule, anything from the forging of diplomatic alliances to subversion of a rival's clients and retainers and outright warfare could be seen as part of the same political process. In his account of the emergence of the Maratha states of the Deccan, André Wink has shown that a single Islamic term, *fitna* – 'rebellion' (though Wink argues that this is an unsatisfactory translation) – came to be applied to all exercises of state power which the western tradition would divide into contrasting categories of revolt or sedition and 'legitimate' expressions of sovereignty.<sup>18</sup> This meant that in the scramble for power which followed the decline of Mughal authority, virtually anyone with sufficient military backing could exercise sovereign power in an Indian domain. But the very fluidity of this system meant that military power alone could not guarantee a ruler's survival. Precisely because the concept of sovereignty was so open-ended it was essential for new dynasts to surround themselves with a convincing aura of kingship. In this way they might hope to amass enough authority to resist the 'fitna' which confronted them at all times.

It was all the more difficult for the nawabs of the Carnatic to create a tradition of Islamic kingship since the south had so little direct experience of Muslim rule, and since Arcot could claim only the most remote 'succession' to the Mughals. As in many other eighteenth-century domains, this process of state-building took place in the face of bitter competition from a multitude of rival powers. In the south the battle for resources and strategic advantage was waged against the French and English East India Companies as well as the major regional powers – Hyderabad, the Maratha powers, and the expanding military domain of Mysore under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan. In addition to these great powers the nawabs had to deal with the many contending rajas and poligar chiefs whose tribute and allegiance they claimed. There was also resistance from a variety of military adventurers, all with armies and fortified bases in the Tamil country.

As in north India, these rival powers had two important characteristics in common. First, as the preceding account of 'fitna' and political conflict suggests, they were all highly militarised societies. The main prerequisite for the new eighteenth-century regimes was an expensively equipped European-style army; no aspiring ruler could survive without efficient recruiting techniques and control of enough revenue to finance such a force. Secondly, the new state-builders were assiduous in carrying out

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

acts of religious patronage. In both north and south India displays of conspicuous piety were as important to the process of political consolidation as the formation of armies and the creation of an effective state revenue apparatus.<sup>19</sup>

These two aspects of state-formation were closely linked. Both can be seen as a response to the ambiguities of sovereignty in eighteenth-century India, and both were perceived as indispensable attributes of kingship. It is easy to see why the possession of military power was considered an essential mark of kingly status for any Hindu or Muslim ruler; the Walahjabs maintained a sizeable army until the last quarter of the eighteenth century.<sup>20</sup> As to the ruler's religious role, it has already been shown that in societies which would now be classed as 'Hindu', the building and embellishment of shrines and the recruitment of priestly specialists were seen as fundamental obligations of kingship. At the same time there was an important practical aspect to these acts: in stimulating the consumption of goods and services, the king promoted the material welfare of his domain, and ultimately this too contributed to the cosmic harmony of which he was guarantor.<sup>21</sup>

Over the centuries since the founding of the first Delhi sultanates Indo-Muslim society evolved a tradition of political thought which united Muslim – especially Persian – and indigenous Hindu perceptions of power and sovereignty. This tradition derived from a very specific notion of correct 'kingly' behaviour. Again what was required were continual acts of piety and munificence, and here too these benefactions were not to be confined to shrines and ceremonial. It was expected for example that the lord of a true Muslim domain would surround himself with items of value and refinement and maintain the wide array of clients and retainers who made up a suitable princely 'establishment'. As in the ideal Hindu domain, the Muslim ruler had an obligation to generate wealth. Both his own spending and the model of aristocratic consumption which he provided for his courtiers secured the livelihoods of artisans, ritualists and commercial people within his domain. In addition to generating revenue, the ruler's displays of patronage and pious charity also showed that he commanded the style and trappings appropriate to kingship, and thus helped to confirm the legitimacy of his rule.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen*, pp. 129–39.

<sup>20</sup> As of 1761 Muhammad Ali owed the Company 2.5 million pagodas for the troops who campaigned against Mysore and the poligars. To reduce this debt he ceded some of his revenue-bearing districts but still owed 2 million pagodas to private creditors. See N.S. Ramaswami, *Political History of Carnatic*, pp. 306–7.

<sup>21</sup> See A.M. Hocart, *Kingship* (Oxford, 1927).

<sup>22</sup> Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen*, pp. 57–68.

These features can all be seen in the tradition of princely rule which was established by the nawabs of Arcot. Both the Navaiyats and the Walahjahs sought to create a style of munificence which had much in common with the court culture of the other former Mughal domains. Here the ruler's lavish spending is to be equated with piety and moral worth, as is made clear in the classic chronicle of nawabi rule, Burhan Ibn Hasan's *Tuzak-i-Walajahi*. This work has much in common with the Navaiyats' dynastic chronicle, the *Sayeednamah*. In his character sketch of Muhammad Ali Walajah Burhan states: 'His chief traits were to open inns, build mosques, found hospitals for the poor, build bridges, dig wells, improve gardens and rivers, both in his own country and elsewhere, – all these in the way of Allah.'<sup>23</sup> This then was an ideal which conceived of bridge-building and other apparently secular works in much the same terms as the founding of mosques and shrines. In all these acts the nawab was acting as a moral exemplar to his subjects. These same qualities of pious kingship were also to be displayed through his support for holy men and literati.

The spring showers were but a drizzle when compared with his shower of gems in charity... The empty pockets of men from far-off lands became filled (with gold); the shoulders and backs of the learned from every part of the country were made heavy (with presents).<sup>24</sup>

In this period, the Walahjahs' acts of princely benefaction were focused on the localities which served as administrative and military centres for the new regional states. In the early phase of Walajah rule the old nayaka capital of Trichy received a particularly large share of this largesse. The reasons for this are quite clear. The four miles of walls, towers, ditches and ramparts which the nayakas dug into the famous Trichy Rock site in the seventeenth century had transformed this ancient temple down into the most important military stronghold in south India. As one locally based Jesuit missionary reported in 1719,

Trichy, where the [nayaka] prince lives, is a very populous city and of considerable extent. It is the finest fortress between Cape Comorin [Kanniyakumari] and Golconda. Many armies have besieged it, but always unsuccessfully.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout the eighteenth century the town and its Rock Fort were

<sup>23</sup> *Tuzak*, II, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13. Muhammad Ali made numerous inam grants in this period. See TCR 7967/ Collec. to BOR 12 April 1837, 12 May 1837/ 51, 73/pp. 46–9, 74–81/TNA.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Lewis Moore, *A Manual of the Trichinopoly District* (Madras, 1878), p. 128. In mid-century there was a garrison of 6,000 men, a double wall with sixty towers, 130 cannon and a moat stocked with crocodiles. Orme, *Indostan*, I, pp. 138, 180.

raided and fought over by almost every would-be ruler and power-broker in south India. When Muhammad Ali Walahjah made his bid for the nawabi in 1749, he staked his claim to the succession on his command of the town and its fortifications. It was from Trichy that he declared himself nawab, and throughout the early period of his reign Muhammad Ali's authority was perceived as emanating directly from the Trichy fortress site. Even when he moved his formal capital from Trichy to Arcot and then to the British-built palace complex at Chepauk in Madras, Trichy continued to be hailed as one of the regime's greatest assets: almost by definition, the man who held Trichy was a south Indian ruler.<sup>26</sup>

This was largely due to the fame and sanctity of Trichy's holy places. Like Madurai, Tirunelveli, Vellore and the other great fortress towns of the region – indeed like most of the smaller fort-mart centres (kottai-pettais) located throughout the Tamil country – the town's main strategic points had great religious significance. The Rock fort itself was a place of shrines and holy places: there were the rock-cut Siva temples dating back to Pallava times, the sacred footprint sites which are associated both with Vishnu and with the great Trichy pir, Nathar Wali, and the massive Sri Thayamunavar temple which was cut deep into the interior of the Rock. The surrounding countryside was also dotted with strategically placed rock formations of which the Golden Rock and the so-called Faqir's Rock were the most celebrated: these too contained important local temple and pir cult sites.

By the beginning of the eighteenth-century the Rock fort sites were thought of as part of a single interconnecting cluster of holy places. Like other well-known Tamil shrines and temples, each was a popular pilgrimage site in its own right and was known and venerated very widely in south India. At the same time though, almost all such south Indian sites – dargahs, great temples, shrines of lesser blood-taking power deities and their associated cult objects and symbolic tokens – were perceived as forming part of a localised sacred landscape with each of the individual sites taking on enhanced power and prestige from its bonds and legendary interactions with all the others.<sup>27</sup>

Some of these links have already been described – the tales of marriages and kinship ties between gods and goddesses, the claims of discipleship uniting groups of interrelated Sufis, and the intermingling of motifs and pilgrimage programmes which identified individual pirs with the 'high' gods and power divinities of a particular region. Within these

<sup>26</sup> Moore, *Trichinopoly*, p. 128. Trichy was an important Chola centre, and there are seventh-century Pallava inscriptions on the Rock.

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. TCR 7968/Collec. to BOR 17 May 1839/66/pp. 219–20/TNA; Pate, *Tinnevely*, p. 499.

webs of devotion and cult affiliation, what counted was the power or sacred energy of the gods and cult figures, and the supernatural links and associations which united them: formal boundaries of sect and communal affiliation were of relatively minor importance at this time.

By the beginning of the eighteenth-century the Trichy Rock had come to be identified as part of a network which had been built up around the cults of the town's two most famous sacred personages – the lord of the Srirangam temple (Lord Vishnu as Sri Ranganathaswami) and the Trichy pir Nathar Wali. It has already been seen how closely the Srirangam shrine and the Nathar Wali dargah were related in the pre-colonial period. Their devotional traditions were full of shared motifs and legends, and their chronicles and shrine histories portrayed the two beings as counterparts or divine partners. There were dozens of smaller temples and pir cult shrines around Trichy which had been drawn into this same web of affiliation and interaction, and as in several other south Indian shrine towns – Kanchi is one of the most striking examples – the Srirangam temple and the Nathar Wali dargah had come to co-ordinate the timing of some of their annual festival celebrations. They were even known to share the same elephants and other 'kingly' accoutrements.

The Walahjahs directed many of their most lavish acts of 'kingly' piety towards the Trichy holy places. Dozens of pir shrines around the town are known to have been endowed and patronised by the Walahjahs and their retainers, and to have been included in the nawabs' great periodic state pilgrimages (such as the 1823 pilgrimage to Nagore). The Nathar Wali shrine was one of the major beneficiaries of this patronage. The graceful dome and most of the other structures which now make up the dargah date from Muhammad Ali's reign, and the shrine's historical traditions claim the Walahjahs as the greatest of the dargah's many benefactors. There was more to this benefaction though than a wish to associate the new regime with one of the most potent of south India's cult saints. The dargah had also been a place of great importance to the Walahjah's old Navaayat enemy Chanda Sahib: this so-called usurper is still remembered as another of the shrine's major eighteenth-century donors. This was why the Walahjahs were so eager to establish their own rights of 'princely' benefaction at the site, and the obvious way for Muhammad Ali to make the point was through the all-pervading south Indian symbolism of blood and dismemberment.

When Chanda Sahib was put to death by the Maratha raja of Tanjore, his body was handed over to the new Walahjah nawab. Muhammad Ali is said to have had the severed head tied to a camel and paraded five times round the walls of Trichy, and the dismembered torso was buried inside

the precincts of the Nathar Wali dargah.<sup>28</sup> The point of this move was to show that Chanda Sahib's domain had been taken over and absorbed into the realm of the triumphant Walahjahs. By asserting themselves in this way, the new ruling line was invoking one of the key principles of the south Asian Sufi tradition. It has already been seen that like most other pirs in the Muslim world, the cult saints of south India were perceived and venerated as royal beings; such pirs were also recognised as precursors of real-life kings. This meant that the realm of the Walahjahs could be portrayed as a fulfilment of the supernatural domain ruled by Nathar Wali. By interring Chanda Sahib inside the grounds of the shrine, the nawab's newly vanquished enemy was transformed into a disciple and subject of the warrior pir: like the slaughtered Nandi at the hands of the triumphant Penukonda saint, he too was consumed and assimilated into the realm of the nawabs, and thus into the realm of their pir and patron Nathar Wali. At the same time, the move fitted in with the motifs which were used to describe succession and domain-building in the south Indian poligar country. In this context Chanda Sahib was treated as the demonic enemy who is beheaded and triumphed over by the lord of a newly founded warrior chieftdom.

### **Nawabi statecraft under the Walahjahs**

The most successful feature of Walahjah rule was the fact that the nawabs were able to forge links of this kind with south India's fierce qalandar pirs and with the power divinities who were revered by the region's important martial groups. Furthermore they made these moves while simultaneously creating a recognisably 'Islamic' identity for the new regime. For example, it was this focus on Islamic themes which led Muhammad Ali to assign Muslim place-names to the region's key towns. This was yet another assertion of sovereignty, a demonstration that the major strategic and sacred localities of the region had been absorbed into a new domain ruled by Muslims and endowed with the style and symbolism of a conventional Muslim realm. But while Saadatullah Khan and the other Navaiyats had invented straightforward dynastic names such as Saadat-nagar and Saadatpattan for their towns, Trichy did not become 'Muhammad Ali-nagar' or 'Walahjah-nagar' under the second nawabi line. What mattered to the Walahjahs was continuity, and the nawab's claim of succession to the qalandars and tariqa Sufis of Tamilnad. As a result this key power base was renamed 'Nathar-nagar' in honour of the town's most potent reigning saint: the nawabs were making an explicit

<sup>28</sup> Orme, *Indostan*, I, pp. 240–1. The grave is still pointed out to visitors.

connection between the political system they were seeking to build and the locally based supernatural domain or vilayat of the Trichy pir.

Even in the early stages of Walahjah rule, Muhammad Ali and his successors were able to go far beyond the limits of a specifically Muslim form of 'kingly' piety. The incorporative and all-embracing form of statecraft which they established was a feature which Arcot had in common with many of the most successful pre-colonial warrior regimes and post-Mughal 'successor states': Martanda Varma's Travancore and the wide-ranging state system of the Marathas are the obvious parallels here. It was also an asset which compensated to some extent for the regime's well-known military and fiscal weaknesses. This was why, despite their commitment to Islamic forms of statecraft, the nawabs also revered and patronised the region's great Hindu holy places. On this point the Walahjahs were seen by their Hindu subjects as differing quite sharply from the south's other Muslim state-builders. In Malabar and the Tamil country Tipu Sultan of Mysore is remembered as a Brahman-killer and a despoiler of south Indian temples, and although the atrocity stories associated with the late eighteenth-century Mysorean invasions are certainly much exaggerated, the contrast with the prevailing memory of Muhammad Ali Walahjah's reign is very striking.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike his Navaiyat predecessors, Muhammad Ali Walahjah appears in the chronicles of several south Indian temples as a ruler who fulfilled the standard dharmic obligation to protect and endow Hindu holy places. The records of the Tirupati shrine make a clear distinction between the Navaiyat nawab Saadatullah Khan, who is said to have reduced the daily allowances of the temple to a mere one sixteenth of the sums fixed by the former Vijayanagar and nayaka rulers, and Muhammad Ali Walahjah who is praised as a great benefactor of the temple.<sup>30</sup>

In 1760 Muhammad Ali presided over a great rite of royal 'incorporation' at the Silambar temple near Chidambaram, site of the legendary throne of Sulaiman. He and his successors also made names for themselves as patrons and protectors of shrines in major fortress sites such as Palaiyamkottai and Trichy. Sites with strong nawabi associations

<sup>29</sup> Tipu did attack temples and Brahmans in areas such as Malabar where he was opposed by local revenue takers, and late in his reign he sought a more exclusively Islamic identity for his regime. Earlier, both he and his father patronised Hindu maths and temples. While besieging Trichy in 1781, Haidar 'waited in person on the Bramins of Seringham [Srirangam] Pagoda, with a propitiatory acknowledgement to Vistnou [the god Vishnu]'; Tipu acted as benefactor to several Mysore temples. Fullarton, *View of the English Interest*, p. 7; Buchanan, *Journey from Madras*, II, p. 251; Hamilton, *East India Gazetteer*, p. 276.

<sup>30</sup> Tamil 'Yadast or Memorandum' on Tirupati finances, 1803, Mackenzie Collection - General, vol. 16, p. 476 e-1. IOL.

include the Sri Nellaiyappa temple in Tirunelveli town and the massive Srirangam temple complex at Trichy. There are records of Muhammad Ali's benefactions to Srirangam, and he is even reported to have arbitrated in disputes over ceremonial 'honours' and precedence at this temple.<sup>31</sup> All this suggests that the Walahjahs were able to identify themselves with some of the south's most active and expansive sacred networks. In key localities such as Trichy they succeeded in mapping themselves onto the localities' pre-existing sacred landscape. They then enlisted this idea of an established and dynamic network of south Indian holy places to give definition and identity to the nawabi realm.

These moves also had important strategic consequences. Many of the nawabi period's most hotly contested military campaigns centred on conflicts for control of the region's formally Hindu holy places. This was partly because so many traders, artisans, ritualists and even military people tended to cluster in the major temple towns; most would-be rulers concentrated on these localities in their campaigns to build alliances with the region's key specialist groups. The shrine's great hoards of coin and jewels made them obvious targets for looting expeditions, and they also represented important long-term sources of revenue for would-be rulers, most notably from the taxing of devotees along the region's major pilgrimage routes. Beginning in 1755 this system was placed on a commercial footing, and the revenues of important Hindu shrines were rented out under much the same system as was used in managing the district land revenue, as well as more specialised local resources such as the region's pearl and chank fisheries (see below, chapter 8).<sup>32</sup>

All this suggests that the power which resides in south India's temples should be understood to include the temple's endowment of strategic and commercial resources as well as the sacred forces residing within it. It is this which made the temples such important political assets in the eighteenth century, and the Walahjahs were well aware of their value. This can be seen from the history of south India's most sought after prize, the Tirupati temple complex. The nawab had claimed the right to receive the Tirupati pilgrim taxes during the early 1750s; he was then forced to sign over his income from Tirupati to the East India Company to help pay for his contingents of Company troops. Once this had happened it was clear that the nawab's claims of suzerainty were open to challenge, and

<sup>31</sup> *Tuzak*, II, p. 244; K. D. Swaminathan, 'Two Nawabs of the Carnatic and the Sri Rangam Temple', in *Medieval India. A Miscellany*, III (Bombay, 1975) pp. 184-7; Pate, *Tinnevely*, p. 492. See also BOR vol. 796/29 June 1818/44/pp. 7444-512/TNA.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* The massive construction of many south Indian temples made them ideal for use as military strongholds. See Orme, *Indostan*, I, p. 541; Venkatarama Ayyar, *Manual of Pudukkottai*, II, Pt 1, p. 798.

virtually all of his military rivals launched raids on the temple in the hope of winning control of its lucrative pilgrim revenues.

The most successful of these raiders was Muhammad Ali's brother Nazibulla Khan. This would-be dynast was one of two so-called 'rebel' Walajahs who campaigned during the 1750s to unseat Muhammad Ali and take power as ruling lords of the Carnatic. In 1757–8 the key tactic in this exercise in 'fitna' was the setting up of blockades to stop pilgrims travelling to Tirupati. Such moves disrupted the flow of revenue to Muhammad Ali's British patrons, and therefore constituted a challenge to the nawab's own authority.<sup>33</sup> The interruption of the Tirupati pilgrim traffic was an assertion of sovereignty in another sense: for both Hindus and Muslims, and for all those who were still not formally identified with one or other communal group, the control of holy places was universally recognised as a sign of sovereign power. This is why the nawab had made such a point of incorporating both Hindu and Muslim pious foundations into his political networks; anyone who hoped to usurp his authority had no choice but to fight for mastery of the region's key sacred sites.<sup>34</sup>

Two years later the Tirupati temple was the scene of another incident in which strategic and sacred considerations again overlapped. In 1759 a Maratha army seized and occupied the temple, and the British dispatched a force of 300 men to retake the site. It was then discovered that only eighty of these sepoys were Hindus of clean caste. None of the others could be permitted to ascend the sacred hill on which the temple stood, and it was therefore impossible to attack the Maratha positions. There was a farcical interlude during which the leaders of the sepoy detachment appealed repeatedly for reinforcements. The Company authorities in Madras kept sending more Muslim and low-caste or *avarna* Hindu sepoys, none of whom could be used in an assault. Eventually the Madras force gave up and went off instead to overrun the fortress of a nearby poligar: this deprived the Marathas of one of their important local allies, and they eventually withdrew from the site.<sup>35</sup>

Two points emerge here. First, Tirupati was situated in an upland poligar area, and had long been a key shrine for the sort of warriors and poligar chiefs for whom Brahmanical ideals of purity and ceremonial precedence were relatively unimportant. Even so the temple had now become an arena of conflict in which considerations of formal caste rank and hierarchy were applied without question. As of the middle of the eighteenth century there was now a complex interplay between the

<sup>33</sup> Although the nawab had made over these dues to the East India Company, it would still be a failure of his authority if the sums were not paid. Stuart, *North Arcot*, I, pp. 71–3.

<sup>34</sup> Orme, *Indostan*, II, pp. 317–18.

<sup>35</sup> Stuart, *North Arcot*, I, pp. 73–4.

world of the great temple and its schemes of hierarchical rank and precedence, and the world of the unstratified martial predator groups.

The second point is that everyone involved in this conflict – the Marathas, the Company and the nawab – recognised the vital importance of the great south Indian temples both as sources of revenue and as repositories of sovereign power and authority. The British (or at least their officers at the scene) and their client ruler Muhammad Ali all seem to have accepted that this conflict involved rival claims to spiritual dominion as well as a straightforward struggle for military and strategic advantage. The nawab could not compromise his position as patron and protector of Hindu holy places whatever the immediate military situation might appear to dictate. This is why the forces fighting on his behalf had paradoxically to be even more punctilious than a formally 'Hindu' army would have been in preserving the ritual purity of the Tirupati shrine.

What these events show, then, is that there could be no real separation between the sacred function of the Tamil shrines, and their role in the political and military process of nawabi-era state formation. When the Walahjah ruler performed acts of patronage at Srirangam, he was acknowledging the shrine as a place of power within one of the great religious networks which comprised his domain. And in associating himself with these holy places, in incorporating them into his realm and assuming authority over them, the nawab was asserting his authority in a way which fused the concepts of secular and supernatural power.

The nawab's tactics of statecraft transcended communal and religious boundaries because such boundaries had little meaning in terms of the actual operation of the region's religious system. In south India virtually all great shrines and holy places – Muslim, Hindu and Christian – were perceived as fundamentally similar repositories of divine power and energy: all could be absorbed within a ruler's networks of patronage and benefaction and all were proper recipients of his largesse. This shared conception of the power inherent in shrines and holy places was associated with an equally pervasive set of ideas which conceived of individual shrines and pilgrimage places as belonging to unified religious networks. This web of relationships was maintained through the many pilgrimage routes which criss-crossed the region and through the vast body of oral traditions and stalapurana texts which created an overarching grid of mutual reference and affiliation for these sites.

### **Islamic court culture under the Walahjahs**

The second stage in the evolution of the Walahjah regime can be dated from about 1765–6. It was at this point that Muhammad Ali received the

Mughal sanads granting him the rank of *mansabdar* of 9000 and two prestigious new titles – *Amir al-Hind* and *Walajah*. The other key event of this period was that in 1766 the nawab moved his court from Arcot, which had been his capital since 1755, to his opulent new residence at Chepauk in Madras.<sup>36</sup>

The style and culture of the Chepauk court soon began to show signs of the nawab's growing involvement with the English East India Company. The palace itself was probably designed for Muhammad Ali by the notorious Paul Benfield, a military engineer turned financier who could easily stand as the very model of the rapacious eighteenth-century English 'nabob'. Madras contained dozens of these figures, East India Company servants and freelance speculators who profited hugely from the business of supplying and servicing the nawab's establishment. Thanks to them and their European agents, Muhammad Ali filled the vast neo-Palladian *mahals* of the palace with English furniture, pictures and 'novelties' (magic lanterns, clockwork toys and the like). A few remnants of this collection are still on show in 'Amir Mahal', the palatial Madras residence which was built for the Walajahs in 1875.<sup>37</sup>

Twenty years later the web of indebtedness which bound the nawab to his English creditors became the focus of Britain's greatest eighteenth-century political scandal.<sup>38</sup> One result of this was that it became fashionable to portray Muhammad Ali as a decadent oriental potentate – 'suspicious, vain and ambitious' – whose fiscal plight was supposed to have been brought about by the "Mussulman"'s taste for pointless luxury. Today the opulence of India's eighteenth-century courts is no longer dismissed as an empty extravagance, and the rulers themselves are not seen as mere pawns to be swindled and manipulated by the wily European. It is true that like his contemporaries in Lucknow, Benares and the other new regional capitals of the north, Muhammad Ali

<sup>36</sup> S. Muhammad Husayn Nainar, 'Some Madras monuments' p. 68, in *Madras Tercentenary*, pp. 67–72.

<sup>37</sup> Benfield was one of the nawab's chief creditors. See Lucy S. Sutherland, *The English East India Company in Eighteenth-Century Politics* (Oxford, 1952), p. 318, notes 1–2; and J.D. Gurney, 'Fresh light on the character of the Nawab of Arcot', pp. 222–8, in A. Whiteman, J.S. Bromley and P.G.M. Dickson, eds., *Statesmen, Scholars and Merchants. Essays Presented to Dame Lucy Sutherland* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 222–41. And see Mildred Archer, *India and British Portraiture 1770–1825* (London, 1979), pp. 54–5; Henry Dodwell, *The Nabobs of Madras* (London, 1926), pp. 27–8; Ramaswami, *Political History*, pp. 317–25; H.D. Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras, 1640–1800* (3 vols. and Index, London, 1913), II, pp. 609–12. Following the suppression of the nawabi in 1855, the former Walajah rulers were granted the title Princes of Arcot.

<sup>38</sup> Sutherland, *The English East India Company*. The financing of the nawab's debts gave rise to vast frauds. Over £30 million was claimed by Muhammad Ali's private creditors; in 1805 only £2.7 million of these claims were found to be legitimate. Ramaswami, *Political History*, pp. 238–326.

had accepted the view that an Italianate neo-classicism – or at least an exuberant approximation of the neo-classical – was the proper style for a princely residence. Thus in architecture as in military matters, Europeans were now the dominant influence throughout much of India, and both the armies and the architectural traditions of the ‘successor states’ were shaped to fit these canons.<sup>39</sup>

This does not mean that Muhammad Ali was simply aping European taste in a naive attempt to impress his English creditors. For example the nawab was a great patron of European painters such as the Scottish portrait artist George Willison (1741–97), who worked in Madras between 1774 and 1780. These painters were largely supported by commissions from English ‘nabobs’ who had amassed great fortunes from their illicit Indian investments and now aspired to the role of cultivated patron and art lover. Willison charged Muhammad Ali twice the going rate for his works and earned enough money to retire to England as a ‘nabob’ in his own right.<sup>40</sup> But this was not a sign of passivity and fecklessness on the part of the nawab. In all pre-colonial Islamic societies the true prince was a patron of art and learning and an arbiter of taste and refinement in his domain. Therefore in conferring these commissions Muhammad Ali was engaging in the kind of lavish spending which identified him as a man of power.

In these terms the more costly the picture the more it served the purpose for which it was intended. It could only reflect well on the nawab to be seen as a dispenser of careless largesse to an Englishman. Anyone who profited from his lavish spending could be seen as a retainer; this meant that the European artists and architects whom he recruited enhanced his standing in much the same way as the European mercenaries and military engineers who served in his army.<sup>41</sup> Willison’s work also had political value in its own right. In the Muslim states of the Deccan and north India the ceremonial presentation of portraits had long served as a means of expressing suzerainty and overlordship. In pictures such as ‘Muhammad Ali Khan, Nawab of Arcot, with attendants’ (c. 1775) Willison presents the nawab as a study in noble serenity, a majestically bearded prince in pearl-decked silk robes. These portraits too were intended for presentation – one was despatched to George III – or for

<sup>39</sup> Banmali Tandan, ‘The architecture of the nawabs of Avadh’, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1979.

<sup>40</sup> Mildred Archer, *Early Views of India. The Picturesque Journeys of Thomas and William Daniell. 1786–1794* (London, 1980), p. 9; Archer, *India and British Portraiture*, pp. 99–107.

<sup>41</sup> Like all eighteenth-century Indian rulers, Muhammad Ali employed a large number of European military men. See e.g. BOR vol. 3566/29 June 1807/p. 185/TNA.

display in the darbar hall at Chepauk. They served the same basic function as the great works of Mughal court portraiture, but since it was British royals and the nawab's European creditors who were to receive the portraits, he commissioned western artists to ensure that their political message was conveyed intelligibly.<sup>42</sup>

Despite all these signs of the European impact on the court and its culture, the Arcot domain was far from being a mere appendage of the English East India Company. In this phase of Muhammad Ali's reign the central focus of the nawabi was the development of a tradition of kingship which was authentically Islamic and as broadly-based as possible, with links to shrines and sacred places throughout the Carnatic and the wider Muslim world. It was one of the main aims of the *Tuzak-i-Walahjahi* to describe the acts of benefaction and largesse which proved that the Walahjahs were true Islamic rulers. The work places much emphasis on Muhammad Ali's role as a mosque-builder, and it also highlights the many other examples of conspicuous piety which involved the formal side of Muslim faith and worship rather than its mystical and ecstatic aspect.

In his worship of Allāh he was not remiss even to the smallest extent, and he took on himself the observances of a devotee... He was diligent in repeating *durūd* [prayer; praise of the Prophet] and immersed himself in thoughts of Allāh.<sup>43</sup>

Most of the elegant mosques, tombs and public buildings which are such a striking legacy of Walahjah rule date from the period after the move to Madras. Several of the finest of these new structures were located in Trichy. It was here for example, in the regime's original power base with its rich mixture of strategic and sacred associations, that Muhammad Ali built the majestic red sandstone Walahjahi masjid on a site near the base of the Rock, close to the palace and darbar hall of the nayaka rani Magnammal (1689–1704). In Madras too there were imposing new places of worship. These include the graceful *masjid Ma'mur* in Angappa Nayaka street in Georgetown, built in 1784, and the great Walahjah mosque in Triplicane, another imposing sandstone masjid with an adjoining cluster of *gunbads* – domed tombs of the Walahjah family and their retainers, together with the shrine of the Lucknavi Sufi master Maulana Abdul Ali Bahr al-Ulum.

As its security and resources increased, the regime began to undertake acts of benefaction which were both more lavish and more conspicuously

<sup>42</sup> W.G. Archer, *Indian Miniatures* (London, 1960), pp. 7–15. Muhammad Ali's largesse was even directed to the city's European churches. The nawab pledged a subscription to an altar-piece by Willison which had been commissioned for St Mary's Church in Ft St George. Archer, *India and British Portraiture*, p. 106. Willison's portrait of Muhammad Ali is reproduced in *ibid.*, Plate II.

<sup>43</sup> *Tuzak*, II, p. 12.

'Islamic' than those of the earlier nawabi period. The mere building of all these mosques was one sign of this heightening of 'Islamic' identity; another was the fact that the new dynastic monuments were all built in the classical Persianate style which had now come to be accepted throughout north India and the Deccan. Unlike the mosques and dargahs of Kayalpatanam and other Tamil Muslim towns, these Walahjah foundations contain no *maṇṭapams* (pillared halls) or lotus emblems, that is none of the Tamil Hindu architectural features which were so common in the region's other Muslim architecture.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to this use of a 'high' Islamic style in architecture, Muhammad Ali also sought to create a broader Islamic identity for the regime by building up contacts with the great centres of authority in the so-called Muslim heartlands. Like other eighteenth-century Muslim rulers including Tipu Sultan of Mysore and, in southeast Asia, the sultans of the Indonesian port state of Atjeh, Muhammad Ali applied for symbols of endorsement and recognition from the Ottoman sultan. In the 1770s he was vested with Ottoman *sanads* granting him the right to perform acts of service within the sanctuary of the Kaaba and the Prophet's Mosque at Medina. The deceptively humble entitlements which these sanads conferred, the right to light candles and spread the mats in the great holy places, were cherished marks of rank and honour in the Muslim world.<sup>45</sup>

In the *Tuzak-i-Walahjahi* these acts of formal or 'orthodox' piety are seen as part of the nawab's fulfilment of the ideal of princely munificence.

He [Muhammad Ali I] strove to satisfy the physical needs of the needy, and set at rest the anxieties of the poor. Every year he despatched two ships *Safīnatu'llāh* and *Safīnatu'r-rasūl* laden with presents and money for the maintenance of the stalls for water-supply and serais and for the award of *nadhr* [*nazar*: ceremonial prestations] to the noble and pious residing in Makka [Mecca] the Exalted, Madina the Illuminated, Najaf the Eminent, Karbala the High, and Mashhad the Glorious. . . He renewed in his name, from the sultan of Rūm, the hereditary rights to sweep and light the holy places in Makka and Medina.<sup>46</sup>

The financing of the two ships bearing gifts and pilgrims to Mecca and Medina was one of the best known of the nawab's acts of conspicuous piety. It may come as a surprise to find this nominally Sunni lineage

<sup>44</sup> Even in 'Islamic' Kayalpatanam there are lotus emblems and other Hindu architectural features in several religious foundations, including the fourteenth-century periyapalli or 'great mosque'. Many revenue-free inam grants were made to mosques, dargahs and other religious foundations in this period, as can be seen from the nineteenth-century debates over proposed resummptions of many nawabi inams. See e.g. Report on lapsed inams, 30 Nov. 1852/238/TCR/TNA.

<sup>45</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, p. 91.

<sup>46</sup> *Tuzak*, II, p. 12.

supporting Shia holy places and allowing their official chronicler to give equal prominence to the great Shia and Sunni religious centres in this account. The point, though, is that eighteenth-century rulers had to use every possible strategy to reconcile disparate interest groups and associate valuable allies and client communities with their regimes. Under Muhammad Ali's father Anwaruddin Khan, the appointment of *qazis* had been used as a means of establishing new lines of clientage and affiliation within the realm. The recruitment of Tamil-speaking Muslims had been achieved in part through the appointment of *qazis*: Anwaruddin Khan appointed a Tamil Muslim named Abu-Bakr as *qazi-ul quzat* of Madras and granted him a *jagir* worth 12,000 rupees a year. This scholar-jurist has been described as 'a great savant of the day belonging to the Lubbai community' though it is more likely that he belonged to a prominent maraikkayar lineage.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to their commercial expertise, the maraikkayar had a key role to play in the nawabs' campaign to create links of patronage with the Islamic centres of west Asia. The two ships bearing alms, pilgrims and princely gifts to the great holy places were supplied and manned for the nawab by the Tamil Muslim traders of Porto Novo ('Mahmud Bandar').<sup>48</sup> Muhammad Ali also assigned the Porto Novo revenues as charitable donations for the poor of Mecca and Medina. These services enhanced the political importance of the maraikkayar centres, and the Tamil traders' ties to the regime can be observed in the wide range of maraikkayar khanaqahs and dargahs which were endowed and often substantially rebuilt with benefactions from Muhammad Ali and his leading courtiers.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout India marriage provided another means by which rulers set the seal on ties of allegiance and affiliation, and these tactical alliances often marked a new stage in the rise of a *parvenu* ruling house. In Arcot as in other eighteenth-century domains, marriages were used to enhance the social standing of the ruler and also to confirm bonds of fealty and alliance within the state. Muhammad Ali was a wily practitioner of this art,

<sup>47</sup> Many Tamilnad Dakhnis profess to be unaware that Tamil-speaking Muslims possess a system of hierarchical ranking: this allows them to dismiss them all as a socially inferior 'convert' population. (See e.g. Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, p. 88.) There were similar tactical appointments in the first period of Mughal expansion into south India. One of the most celebrated Tamil Sufi literati, Shaikh Sadaqatullah of Kayalpatanam (1632–1703: described above, p. 84) refused an appointment as *qazi-ul-quzat* for the southern Carnatic but was content for one of his sons to take the post: this scholar served as *qazi* in Madurai and Kayalpatanam until his death in 1717. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>49</sup> Suharawady, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', p. 38. The most important of the Porto Novo dargahs was built and endowed by the Walajah office-holder Abdul Nabi Khan.

though again, it was his father Anwaruddin Khan who paved the way. In 1737 this ruler arranged the marriage of his son and successor to the Shia noblewoman Khadija Begum. By allying the Walahjah house to a family which claimed imperial Safavid blood by way of their descent from the Adil Shahis of Bijapur, the marriage introduced a much-needed element of aristocratic distinction to the regime.<sup>50</sup> Marriage was also important in the competitions for client communities which were being fought out between all the rival powers in the Carnatic. The creation of kinship ties with a leading Shia lineage was a valuable coup in this struggle. The Shia migrants had emerged as a powerful and prestigious Muslim sub-division within the Carnatic, and the alliance would thus help to counterbalance the networks of clientage and affiliation built up by the Navaiyats.<sup>51</sup>

These considerations explain why there was such a strong Shia presence at the nawabs' court and why the Walahjahs associated themselves with the Shias' religious foundations and festival celebrations.<sup>52</sup> It was at this time that the line established itself as major patrons of Madras city's great annual Mohurram festival. Even today this ancestral tradition is preserved by Muhammad Ali's lineal descendant, the Prince of Arcot. The family's chief role in the festival is to supply one of the ceremonial hand-shaped *panja* standards which are erected along the procession route used by the celebrants. The parading and veneration of Mohurram panjas has been widespread in the nawab's former territories since at least the early nineteenth century: according to 'Mahomed Tippoo' (Muhammad Tipu), Persian interpreter to the Madras Supreme Court in the mid-1830s, the panjas used in the Carnatic were 'generally made of metallic substances in the form of a hand with five fingers extended... [and] are exhibited in different places that are previously furnished and ornamented according to the circumstances of the parties concerned'.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the festival period these emblems receive veneration from Hindus as well as Shia and Sunni Muslims. There

<sup>50</sup> See Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, p. 90. Compare Michael H. Fisher, 'Political marriage alliances at the Shi'i court of Awadh', *CSSH* 25:4 (1983), pp. 593-616.

<sup>51</sup> The Navaiyat ruling lineage had strong Shia connections: Saadatullah Khan's brother and nephew were Shias, though the Navaiyat nawabs themselves were Sunni. Muhammad Ali took this process of alliance-building even further by marrying into the family of his defeated Navaiyat rivals (*ibid.*, p. 43). Another of the key groups whose affiliation was secured through marriage alliances were migrants from Awadh, and particularly men from the Walahjahs' home locality of Gopaumau. See e.g. Nawab to Warren Hastings, 6 rajab 1190 [1776-7] *Copies of Papers Relative to the Restoration of the King of Tanjore* (2 vols. [London], 1777), I, p. 340.

<sup>52</sup> Many Walahjah inam holders were Shias charged with organising local Mohurram celebrations. BOR vol. 4709/31 Aug. 1835/pp. 410-14/TNA.

<sup>53</sup> Mahomed Tippoo, 'Observations on the origin and ceremonies of the Mohurram', *MJLS* 2:9 (1835), p. 319.

are close parallels with the rites of Hindu puja; 'Mahomed Tippoo' reports that the panjas were adorned with flowers and presented with offerings of frankincense and sugar.<sup>54</sup>

The *Tuzak-i-Walahji* focuses on dynastic considerations in explaining the Walahjahs' sponsorship of these panja rites. The custom is said to have begun under Muhammad Ali who gave thanks for the birth of his first son by Khadija Begum by pledging that henceforth he would erect one of the *panjas* used in the Mohurram ceremonies with his own hands.<sup>55</sup> This son of Muhammad Ali, who ruled as the nawab Umdatul Umara from 1795 to 1801, was himself a Shia. In this brief period of formal Shia rule the nawab built some of Madras city's most important Shia places of worship including the elegantly proportioned Thousand Lights mosque and possibly its adjacent *ashurkhana* (the enclosure used by Mohurram celebrants). Even after the Madras Government's decision to overturn the succession and replace Umdatul Umara's son with a nawab of Sunni affiliation, the Walahjahs retained their close ties to Shia families and continued to act as patrons of Shia institutions and ceremonial throughout the Carnatic.

### **Sufi foundations and cult saints in the Walahjah domain**

Although Muhammad Ali placed greater emphasis on the regime's Islamic connections after the move to Madras, he continued to act as patron and protector of the region's Hindu temples, and he made no move to denounce the 'syncretism' of the region's Sufi foundations and cult shrines, with their many links to Hindu and Christian traditions of worship. As a result it is hard to see how Walahjah rule might conform to any model which presumes a neat historical progression from 'impure' or 'un-Islamic' styles of worship to a growing 'Islamisation' of faith and belief. None of the commonly held assumptions about the incompatibility of so-called folk and scriptural forms of Islam can be made to apply to the Carnatic either before or during the period of nawabi rule. There was nothing exclusive in the style of Islamic piety and patronage which these rulers built up, no sign that a commitment to the learned and formal traditions of Muslim worship implied a break with the world of the Sufi adept, the Muslim cult saint and the warrior clansman's tutelary gods and power divinities.

In the years after the move to Madras, Walahjah court patronage reached new heights of grandeur and munificence. From this point on

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Tuzak*, II, pp. 6-8.

Muhammad Ali used all the resources he could command to turn his court into a haven for scholars, poets and mystics so as to create that milieu of culture and piety which was the hallmark of the Islamic capital. The nawab was highly successful in attracting men of learning to the Chepauk court. As early as 1768 he had induced the distinguished literary man Mir Ismail Khan Abjadi (d. *circa.* 1788) to move from Chingleput to Madras. This scholar and poet was descended from a long line of Bijapuri Sufis. Muhammad Ali gave him a post as Persian and Arabic tutor to his sons, and after he had fulfilled his commission to compose the great poetic chronicle of Walajah rule the *Anwarnama*, Abjadi was granted the title Malikush Shuara, which translates roughly as poet laureate.<sup>56</sup>

Even before the move to Madras Muhammad Ali had been associated with prominent Sufis from Hyderabad, Arcot, Chica'cole, Medak and Rajamundry. During this period he recruited Sufi adepts and scholars from as far afield as Alwer and Aurangabad as well as mystics and *ulama* from his own domains.<sup>57</sup> In 1768 the nawab achieved one of his greatest coups by recruiting Maulana Baqir Agah (1745–1805) to his court and appointing him as another tutor to his sons. Over the next twenty years Baqir Agah became one of the most celebrated Muslim literary personalities in India. His output of scholarly and poetic compositions was prodigious. His poems are widely accepted as amongst the most accomplished of the period's Arabic and Persian verse, and his works in the *mathnawi* verse form – particularly his long devotional poem on the life of Abdul Qadir Jilani – made a major contribution to the development of Dakhni as a literary language. Because of his literary and linguistic skills Baqir Agah was a crucial figure in the nawab's campaign to broaden the Islamic identity of his regime. He was given charge of Muhammad Ali's Arabic correspondence, and therefore acted as the nawab's intermediary in correspondence with the great personages of the Arab 'heartland' including the *sharif* of Mecca and the leading *ulama* of the Hijaz.<sup>58</sup>

Apart from being a distinguished literary man and a learned adept of the Qadiriyya Sufi *tariqa*, Baqir Agah belonged to one of the leading Navaiyat lineages of the Carnatic. Thus in inducing him to take service at Chepauk the nawab was continuing to secure the networks of affiliation and support through which his regime was constituted. Baqir Agah was also closely connected with that most prestigious of south Indian Sufi lineages, the Qadiriyya scholar–mystics of the Vellore Hazarat Makan.

<sup>56</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, p. 91. And see Gurney, 'Fresh light', p. 240.

<sup>57</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 91, 222.

<sup>58</sup> Ghose, 'Baqir Agah's contribution'.

He was a disciple of Saiyid Shah Abdul Hasan Qurbi of Hazarat Makan and a friend and contemporary of Qurbi's celebrated son Saiyid Shah Abdul Lateef Zawqi (1738–89). Thus through his patronage of Baqir Agah the nawab was able to identify himself with the prestigious Hazarat Makan establishment just as the Navaiyat nawabs had done.<sup>59</sup>

From this point on, the Vellore Hazarat Makan became a crucial source of legitimacy for the Walahjahs, and Muhammad Ali took pains to associate the institution with the most daring political move of his career. In 1773 a force of nawabi and Company troops invaded the Maratha kingdom of Tanjore and deposed the nawab's nominal feudatory Tulsaji (1763–87). This seizure of south India's most productive rice-belt kingdom was Muhammad Ali's final attempt to make the nawabi a dynamic and financially viable 'successor' realm. In England the takeover was seen as nothing but a crude attempt to preserve the interests of Muhammad Ali's European creditors, and the ensuing outcry led directly to the scandal of the nawab's debts.

Given the importance of the campaign it is striking that Muhammad Ali sought 'permission and benefaction' from the Vellore scholar-master Zawqi when the army was sent into Tanjore. Zawqi duly blessed the enterprise; when Muhammad Ali sought to reward him with a *jagir* (a privileged revenue assignment) he thrust the *parwana* (documentary) recording the grant into a candle and burnt it to ashes. 'Neither I nor my children need any jagir', he declared: the nawab is reported to have been 'awed and silenced' by Zawqi's action.<sup>60</sup> This was a suitably dramatic reminder of the fact that the model Sufi must scorn the blandishments of princes: none the less Zawqi's scruples permitted him to compose a verse in what is known as the *mathnawi* form, hailing the conquest of Tanjore as a triumph of valour and statecraft. In the short term, then, the invasion was a success for the nawab. Although the British soon ate away his added income with huge tribute demands and claims for debt repayments, the acquisition of the Tanjore revenues allowed Muhammad Ali to acquire more troops and expensive new weaponry.<sup>61</sup> The annexation also induced the Vellore Sufis to confer a powerful stamp of Islamic validation on the regime, and for the next few years Muhammad Ali made unprecedented claims of suzerainty within the Tamil country, treating

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*; Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 115–30; Ghouse 'Baqir Agah's Contribution'; Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', p. 46.

<sup>60</sup> From a translation of the '*Matla-al-nur*', pp. 47, 52–3, in 'Hazarath Sayyed Shah Abdul Latheef Qadiri Bijapuri (typescript: n.d.; Hazarat Makan Library). Another account quotes him as declaiming: 'Kingship and a kingdom are not equal to a grain of barley' *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>61</sup> Rajayyan, *Tamil Nadu*, pp. 147–52.

with the European powers as a co-equal sovereign and asserting new rights of overlordship in Ramnad and the other southern warrior domains.

The case of Baqir Agah demonstrates that the regime's Sufi connections were closely allied to its search for contacts with the great centres of Islamic faith and learning in India and in the Arab world. The interpenetration of the realms of popular devotion, Sufi scholarship and high scriptural Islam is illustrated even more clearly in the case of Muhammad Ali's most distinguished literary lion, the illustrious Bahr al-Ulum of Firangi Mahal (see above, p. 147). Bahr al-Ulum had been forced out of Lucknow by the Sunni-Shia power struggle which engulfed the Awadh court during the 1770s. In 1789 he accepted an invitation to take service under Muhammad Ali. The nawab staged a great ceremony of welcome, and when the scholar and his retinue reached the outskirts of Madras, the Walajah ruler himself shouldered the great man's palanquin (sedan chair).<sup>62</sup>

Under the patronage of Muhammad Ali and his son and successor the Shia nawab Umdatul (b. 1748, ruled 1795-1801) Bahr al-Ulum became a leading figure in the literary and intellectual life of the Walajah court.<sup>63</sup> He and his son lie buried in places of honour next to the great Walajah mosque in Triplicane, amongst the tombs of other court luminaries and members of the nawab's family. Yet for all his eminence as a man of learning and scholarship, it has already been seen that Bahr al-Ulum's tomb soon came to function as a much-frequented cult shrine. Its santanakuttam rites were (and still are) just like those which take place at the region's other dargahs, and the site attracts large numbers of Hindus and Muslims. Many of these are afflicted with gastric disorders: they offer up prayers and rub their abdomens against the tomb in the hope of absorbing the healing energy which emanates from the site. They also wrap their ailing parts with red sashes: red is a colour associated with power and energy in the cults of many pirs and also in the worship of the south Indian sakti goddesses.<sup>64</sup>

Bahr al-Ulum is far from being the only eminent scholar-Sufi who has come to attract veneration as a Tamil cult pir. At that most elevated of learned foundations, the Hazarat Makan at Vellore, the tomb of the

<sup>62</sup> N. Ahmed Basha, 'Baharul Uloom. His life and works'. M. Litt. dissertation, University of Madras. The shouldering of the palanquin was a symbol of submission and homage and was thus a token of the nawab's acceptance as subject, disciple and spiritual 'servant' of Bahr al-Ulum.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*; Robinson, 'The Ulama of Firangi Mahall', p. 154; Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 201-9, 227-32.

<sup>64</sup> A major annual *kanturi* is still held at the dargah; it is presided over by a descendant of Bahr al-Ulum who travels from the Lucknow Firangi Mahal for the event.

institution's founder Saiyid Muhammad Shah Abdul Hasan Qurbi is also revered as a repository of barakat. It is sometimes argued that when a scholar-Sufi becomes the object of a popular tomb cult his devotees do not comprehend his teachings; such cults are supposed to grow up without reference to the pir's original identity as a man of learning. But in the real world no such arbitrary distinctions exist. At Vellore the small boys who are in the first stage of the madrasa's rigorous curriculum are encouraged by their teachers to sit on the plinth which surrounds Qurbi's tomb while they study. This close contact with the master's barakat is intended to quicken their faculties and help them avoid the cane switches which are in liberal use as *aides-mémoires* at the school. None of the élite men of learning at Hazarat Makan would recognise any conflict between Qurbi's role as a scholar Sufi and the veneration which is due to him and his descendants as figures of miraculous power. Even in the eyes of the madrasa authorities these two functions overlap and reinforce one another; this is certainly not a pir cult which belongs to the world of 'semi-Islamised' or unlettered 'folk' religion.

### **The Sufi as King**

As has already been seen, Muhammad Ali was a lavish benefactor of dargahs. Throughout their rule the Walahjahs provided support for a wide array of Sufi foundations, and the latter part of the eighteenth-century was a period of great expansion for centres of Muslim devotional activity in Tamilnad. Many of these benefactions were made to new Sufi establishments. In some cases the recipients were literati and holy men whom the Walahjahs themselves had recruited to the Carnatic, many of them from the nawab's home territory in Awadh.<sup>65</sup> Often, though, the regime's benefactions went to shrines and teaching institutions of longer standing. Their adepts and pirzadas included local Tamil-speaking Sufis as well as Deccanis, Malayalis and Sufis from Muslim centres outside India. A typical beneficiary of this type was Saiyid Shah Rahmatullah Jafari Suthari (d. 1753–4), a literary Sufi who presided over a khanaqah and madrasa in Killai.<sup>66</sup>

The support of centres like this enabled the Walahjahs to associate the domain with a living tradition of Sufism. By supporting their shaikhs and by endowing new dargahs and hospices for their devotees, the nawabs could be seen as a line who were visibly enriching the religious landscape of the Carnatic. This in turn was a means of confirming the vitality and

<sup>65</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 190–8.

<sup>66</sup> Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', pp. 43–4.

expansiveness of the regime. In the nawabi's dealings with Sufis and Sufi foundations, the interpenetration of formal learned Sufism and the tradition of the pir cult is clearly apparent. For example in the early years of his residence in Madras the nawab arranged to have the body of the renowned Sufi Shaikh Maqdam Abul Haq Sawi (d. 1751) brought to Madras from its place of burial at Rahmatabad, thirty miles west of Nellore. This Bijapur mystic and literary man is better known by his title 'Dastagir Shah Sawi' or simply 'Dastagir Sahib'. His new grave site was situated in the Mylapore area of Madras city, and the graceful dargah which Muhammad Ali had built over the grave in 1789 is still a place of pilgrimage and cult veneration for large numbers of devotees.

'Dastagir Sahib' was another key figure in the complex networks of discipleship and affiliation which linked the institutional tariqa Sufis of the Carnatic. He too was associated with Hazarat Makan; Zawqi's father Qurbi was one of his disciples. At the same time 'Dastagir Sahib' was himself a disciple of south India's most eminent Naqshbandiya Sufi, Khawja Rahmatullah (1703–80). Sufis of the Naqshbandiya order are known for their connection with movements of militant Islamic fundamentalism: in the eighteenth-century members of the order were active in many parts of Asia in campaigns of Muslim purification and revival.<sup>67</sup>

At first glance Khawja Rahmatullah appears a typical product of this fundamentalist tradition. His Dakhni tracts attacking 'agelong innovations' displayed his order's characteristic hostility to traditions of worship which diverged from those sanctioned in the Quran and Hadiths. Like many other Indian Naqshbandiyas, he was particularly vehement in denouncing popular religious practices which appeared to derive from Shia rites and observances. For a time he took up residence at the seat of the Pathan nawabs who ruled Karnul (Kurnool) in northern Andhra Pradesh. This was not a successful stay: Rahmatullah had to flee the town when the local Muslim population – both Sunnis and Shias – rose up in arms because of his attacks on the carrying of *panjas* (hand-shaped cult objects) in Mohurram processions. His effect on the Shias of Madras was much the same. A Shia literateur composed a chronogram which rendered the date of Rahmatullah's death as 'a wicked dog', and this deadly insult helped to spark off the Sunni–Shia controversy which preoccupied the city's scholars and literati between 1792 and 1801.<sup>68</sup>

Rahmatullah's brief sojourns in two other Andhra Muslim centres, Cuddapah and Sidhout, were equally explosive. He finally settled in Nellore, another domain with a large Pathan population, and founded a

<sup>67</sup> Robinson, *Atlas*, pp. 118–19.

<sup>68</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, p. 104.

khanaqah (hospice) in the small locality which was renamed Rahmatabad in his honour. Muhammad Ali established strong ties with this fierce representative of the puritanical or 'fundamentalist' Sufi tradition.<sup>69</sup> The Walahjah nawab 'sought his prayers and benedictions' when Rahmatullah travelled to Madras, and when he died in 1780 the nawab built the vast five-arched dargah at Rahmatabad in which the saint is entombed.<sup>70</sup>

Rahmatullah's disciple 'Dastagir Sahib' shared many of his master's views: his biographies state that Dastagir Sahib 'checked the rising spirit of Shi'ism [*sic*] in the Carnatic', and his son was known for his attacks on Sufis who displayed 'the wrong attitude towards Shareeat' [*sic*].<sup>71</sup> But 'Dastagir Sahib' also became a figure of ardent cult veneration for Hindus and Muslims in the Tamil country. Even though this Sufi scholar was a Naqshbandiya associated with attacks on Shiism, 'innovation' and 'syncretic' cult worship in general, he was a notable Sufi adept and was therefore perceived as a man endowed with potent supernatural energies. He soon became a popular cult saint in his own right, and his Hindu devotees know him as '*gyan bhandari*' (Skt. 'storehouse of wisdom'). Thus, far from being too simple or too ill-instructed to grasp the point of his fundamentalist teachings, the use of the title suggests that Dastagir Sahib's devotees were well aware of the master's fierce Naqshbandiya strictures. His fervour simply made him appear all the more potent as an embodiment of the cult pir's active energies. He was obviously a figure of awesome power and majesty, and local people had no hesitation in assimilating him into the tradition of the pir and the power divinity.<sup>72</sup>

There is no reason to take the nawab's contacts with these Naqshbandiya Sufis as a sign that the Walahjahs and their court were becoming fundamentalist or 'purist' in this period. What these associations do show is that Muhammad Ali was continuing to pursue the same strategy of incorporation and network-building which he had already initiated in his Trichy period. Thus even after the move to Madras and the creation of

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>70</sup> Interviews Madras, Jan. – March 1983; and *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>71</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 111–12; similar views were held by the scholars of the Vellore Hazarat Makan: Zawqi's biography of his father Qurbi states that this Sufi too 'shunned all association with the Shias and admonished his followers to avoid their company'. ('Hazarath Sayyed Shah Abdul Latheef', p. 22.) One of Qurbi's miracles was to have brought about the deaths of two 'fanatical Shias' who are said to have plotted his murder: 'Their end was very miserable' says the biographer. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–7.

<sup>72</sup> It can not be assumed that those who make contact with the world of 'purist' Islam must inevitably renounce their conceptions of the supernatural and submit to the precepts of fundamentalist reformers. See M.C. Ricklefs, 'Islamization in Java', p. 113, in Levztzion, *Conversion to Islam*, pp. 100–28. See also Ricklefs, *Jogjakarta Under Sultan Mangkubumi*, pp. 288–93.

the self-consciously mosque-building and Mecca-facing court culture at Chepauk, the Walahjahs continued to draw Hindu holy places into their regional patronage networks. One of the most important of these was the celebrated Sri Partasaratisvami temple, not far from the great Walahjah masjid in Triplicane. This temple was typical of the many Hindu foundations which the nawab managed to link in to his web of ceremonial exchange and affiliation. Under Muhammad Ali it became customary to use the great tank of the Triplicane temple for the ceremonial immersion of the panjas (sacred emblems) at the climax of the Madras Mohurram festival. Here too, as at Srirangam and Tirupati, local stalapurana traditions portray the Walahjahs as benefactors and protectors of the shrine.

The transfer of the body of 'Dastagir Sahib' from Rahmatabad to Madras should also be seen as part of this broadening of the regime's religious identity. In bringing the saint's remains to Madras the nawab succeeded in endowing his capital with a new and potent source of barakat. It was also an act which can be seen as a re-enactment of the epic travels which Sufi biographies conventionally ascribe to Sufi masters. These journeys in quest of knowledge and spiritual illumination had a special significance for eighteenth-century Muslim rulers. It will be remembered that the Sufi's epic journeys have long had a variety of symbolic meanings in Muslim tazkira literature. The journey is meant to evoke the saint's inner quest and struggle, but it is also intended as a more-or-less literal account of the coming of the Sufi to his new abode, and of the stages by which his new place of residence is transformed into a centre of teaching and piety.

This is a process which corresponds directly to the creation of a Muslim political domain. The Sufi himself has been perceived as a reigning king. 'Hail to thee king of Nagore', proclaim the devotees of Shahul Hamid in the *Nakaiyantati*, and many other saints are addressed as *Padshah*, lord-emperor. From his khanaqah or hospice, the pir reaches out to rule over an ever-growing spiritual realm: the term used for this, *vilayat*, also refers to a domain or province in the 'real' world. Similarly, dargah, the tomb shrine of a Sufi (Tamilised as *tarkā*) is a word meaning court or seat of authority.<sup>73</sup>

Another convention of south Asian Sufi literature has been to portray the ordeals and conflicts of the saint's journey as a war of conquest. With his army of disciples, the pir overcomes and subjugates local potentates; these become the first of his liegemen, his devotees. He then goes on to

<sup>73</sup> The Trichy pir Nathar Wali is widely known as *Tabl̥ Alam Pādshā* [pātushā]. See Eaton, 'The political and religious authority of the shrine of Baba Farid', p. 348.

build a network of subject-adherents in the same way as a conventional ruler creates webs of political alliance and affiliation. In regions such as Tamilnad where Muslim kingdoms were founded much later than in north India, the Sufi has been widely portrayed as a forerunner of 'real' Muslim rulers, and his domain or vilayat precedes and paves the way for their rule. Because he marks the place in which Muslim conquerors and rulers will ultimately hold power, the pir too is a king in his own right, and he commands his domain with the same power that will eventually come to be vested in these latter-day reigning lords.

By focusing on the idea of Sufis as precursors of kings, it became possible for newly established ruling lines to claim ties of descent or spiritual kinship to the great saints of the past, and through them to the Prophet himself. Such extended genealogies were particularly important to aspiring rulers with less than illustrious family backgrounds. Also if Sufis were kings and precursors of kings, then kingship itself became harder to attack as a dubious or 'un-Islamic' institution. This was particularly relevant to the Walajahs, since their fragile new successor state was particularly vulnerable to charges of 'fitna' against the Mughals and their hypothetical overlords the Nizams.

It follows then that in moving the body of the Naqshbandiya Sufi Dastagir Sahib to Madras, the nawab had expanded the zone of dominion which was vested in the saint so that it extended into his own sphere of power in the Carnatic. The conveyance of the corpse could thus be perceived as a kind of beating of boundaries, an act of piety which connected the power and sovereignty of the saint to the political dominion which the Walajahs were seeking to establish. There is a large body of Tamil tazkira literature which describes the coming of the Sufis of Tamilnad in precisely these terms, that is as the creation of a princely domain. For example, one of the best known Ramnad cult saints, Saiyid Ibrahim Shahid Valiyulla of Eruvadi, is identified as a royal hero and conqueror of the twelfth century. (He is usually said to have been born in Medina in AD 1135–6.) This saint's biographer states,

Saiyid Ibrahim Valiyulla came from Arabia to the southern parts of India. He lit the torch of Islam and established the truth in all lands. He founded his kingdom there [in the Tamil country]... his grace is still pouring fourth...<sup>74</sup>

As in the case of many other south Indian cult saints, Saiyid Ibrahim's journey to India is identified as the progress of an invading army. The saint's 3000 followers are identified not as disciples or companions but as soldier-heroes (Tam. *vīrar*) and the conventional account of arduous

<sup>74</sup> Sali, *Tamilakattu Tarkakkal*, p. 175.

travel takes the form of a military epic. First in Sindh and then in Gujarat, titanic battles are fought against the armies of non-Muslim kings; the pir himself takes up his knife and slaughters whole families of enemy unbeliever princes on the battlefield. In each case the opposing forces are put to flight; after each victory the text declares, 'the majority of the people accepted Islam; Saiyid Ibrahim thought his holy work had been completed. . . ' and so he moves his cavalcade on to the next field of battle.<sup>75</sup>

When the saint and his followers reach the Tamil country there is another gory confrontation. Here the story of the saint's conquests is set against the background of a romantically conceived power struggle amongst three rival Hindu princes who are described as sons of one of the mediaeval Pandya kings of southern Tamilnad. Saiyid Ibrahim exploits this rift in the enemy camp, captures the Pandya royal seat of Madurai and proclaims himself sultan. 'Madurai has now been possessed by Saiyid Ibrahim Valiyulla. Announcing himself as the sultan he took charge of the government. He undertook the preaching of Islam in the country. Because of this Islam spread throughout Madurai.'<sup>76</sup>

The description of the saint as sultan of the Madurai domain is not just poetic hyperbole. The pir is a ruler; his authority is to be conceived in terms of kingship and dominion, and his realm corresponds precisely to that of a 'real' reigning sovereign. The text associates the Eruvadi saint with a very specific set of dynastic traditions. His realm is identified with the shortlived mediaeval 'sultanate' of Madurai, and he is also depicted as a precursor to the eighteenth-century nawabs of Arcot: the texts and biographical traditions place much emphasis on the dargah's history of benefactions from the Walahjahs. As can be seen from the many references to south Indian Hindu rulers in these biographies, the most powerful of south India's Muslim pirs also came to be seen as heirs to the region's Hindu dynastic traditions. Madurai itself was southern Tamilnad's pre-eminent temple town and pre-Walahjah dynastic centre. Thus just as the Nathar Wali biographies link the Trichy pir with the region's mediaeval Chola rulers, so this Eruvadi saint is portrayed as master of Madurai, and as heir and successor to the Pandya rulers who claimed authority over much of southern Tamilnad (including most of the former Chola domains) during the later eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>77</sup>

What this means is that in Tamilnad as elsewhere in India political

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178–80.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182–4. The story appears to combine fragmentary references to the *Mahabharatha* and the classic Persian romances with a semi-historical account of the reassertion of Pandya power in southern Tamilnad in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

power – the power of the Muslim conqueror and ruler – and the power of the sacred and the divine are to be understood as part of a single continuum. Many of the real and semi-legendary Sufis of north India and the Deccan were perceived as sons of princely houses; some eighteenth-century Muslim rulers carried the tokens of their Sufi murshids into battle with them, and opposing armies sometimes confronted one another with an accompanying Sufi at the head of each force.<sup>78</sup> The dargah of the celebrated cult saint Saiyid Baba Fakiruddin is situated in the old Vijayanagar stronghold of Penukonda (now in Andhra Pradesh). In the Persian biography which was transcribed for Mackenzie in 1803, the story of Baba Fakiruddin's miraculous exploits is interwoven with a chronicle of the Hindu warrior lineages who controlled Penukonda, first as feudatories of Vijayanagar and then as Mughal *jagirdars*.

Even before the assertion of Muslim overlordship in the region, these Hindu potentates are regarded in the text as legitimate and worthy rulers, men of 'good nature', once they have been duly incorporated into the saint's domain. When Baba Fakiruddin and his party first arrive in Penukonda (in the early sixteenth-century) there is a great confrontation with the local raja 'Seringa Rayar', and the saint gives a display of his awesome annihilating power.<sup>79</sup> The ruler submits: the saint's khanaqah (hospice) is provided with a lavish endowment, and the king, his descendants and all his court become the saint's faithful devotees. 'This raja for the rest of his life circumambulated the saint's tomb three times every Friday night after taking his bath', says the text.

It is made clear in this text that the forging of these links between king and pir is an act of practical statecraft, a move which allows the ruler to incorporate valuable new clients and allies within his realm. As part of his pledge to the saint the ruler is said to have guaranteed rank, honour and a 'worthy salary' to any 'true believer' (i.e. Muslim) who comes from outside the region to seek service in his domain. The text identifies these incomers as commercial men, and their origins are similar to those of Baba Fakiruddin himself. The pir's homeland is supposed to have been Sistan in southeastern Afghanistan, and the merchants who are drawn to Penukonda at this time are described as 'true believers' who ply the rich

<sup>78</sup> 'Historical sketch of the Pathan principality of Kurnool', in William Kirkpatrick, *Select Letters of Tipoo Sultan to Various Public Functionaries* (London, 1811), Appendix G, p. 1x.

<sup>79</sup> As in the Shahul Hamid biographies, the pir tests his strength against the king's *yogis* (Hindu tantric adepts). Amongst other ordeals the pir and the Hindu holy man are sealed up in sacks full of lime (chunam) and thrown into a tank. The yogi drowns and his corpse is found half-devoured by flesh-eating fish; Baba Fakiruddin emerges unscathed and levitates to a nearby hilltop from which he proclaims his triumph. (1804 Penukonda MS, Mackenzie, p. 55, IOL.)

caravan routes north of the Hindu Kush: they come from 'the Province of Tartery and Cashmeer and Cashghur and Cabul and Khundahar', trading in weapons, war-horses, camels and 'rare goods' such as Chinese satin, shawls and 'bladder of musk'. These resident traders form the existing domain or vilayat of the pir, and they provide indispensable resources and services for the raja's exercise of power in this world. Any newcomers who take up the ruler's offer will come in as new disciples of Baba Fakiruddin. Since the saint had incorporated the Hindu raja into his network of service and affiliation the two realms will begin to grow in parallel: as the text shows, the 'real' kingdom and the pir's invisible supernatural domain are engaged in the same process of recruitment and expansion. The biography itself is both a description of this process, and an account of the formation of a successful Muslim community in the Penukonda kingdom.<sup>80</sup>

The consequence of all this is that Baba Fakiruddin becomes guarantor of the sovereignty of this Hindu lineage, a point which is made quite explicitly in this conventionally 'Islamic' Persian chronicle with its fierce account of the slaughter of the divine bull Nandi. What the text says is that two or three generations after this first raja's submission, the realm is invaded by a Muslim ruler, the sultan of Bedar. The saint does not desert his favoured disciple: even though the reigning raja is a Hindu, the dargah's chief pirzada soothes the ruler and disperses the Muslim invasion force for him.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> 1803 Penukonda MS, Mackenzie, pp. 20–2, IOL.

<sup>81</sup> The pretext for the Bedar sultan's invasion is a mass pilgrimage to the Penukonda dargah. This is seen by the Hindu king as a ploy to smuggle the sultan's army across his borders, thus suggesting that here too armies and would-be domain builders follow in the wake of the Sufi; the real-life pilgrim follows the route of the pir's first journey into his new domain, and this in turn is the cover for an aspiring ruler's advance into his rival's territory. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

## *Warrior martyr pirs in the eighteenth century*

As can be seen from the case of the Eruvadi saint, Saiyid Ibrahim Sultan, warlike hero Sufis have been familiar figures in south India for many centuries. Indeed in a sense every Sufi is a warrior. Everywhere in the Muslim world Sufi literature abounds in images of war and conquest. In devotional works the term *jihad* (holy war) has long been a favourite metaphor for the Sufi's inner struggle, and armed avenger pirs have come to be known and venerated in Muslim societies as far apart as the Caucasus and the Anatolian plain, Bengal and central Java.<sup>1</sup> In south India too the portrayal of Sufis as demon-slayers and supernatural warriors is something which certainly predated the founding of the two nawabi regimes. But for all the familiarity of these martial themes and images, it was in the eighteenth-century that the tradition of the warrior pir came to acquire a new and much more specific significance in south Indian society. In the Tamil country in particular, cult veneration came increasingly to be focused on the figure of the hero martyr or *ghazi-shahid*. Rather than being described as a conventional *tariqa* Sufi or even as an unaffiliated holy man, these pirs appear in the texts and oral traditions as straightforward military men. They are often identified with Sikandar or with the other semi-historical Muslim heroes, but they are thought of primarily as martyred hero-kings and conquerors. Such a Sufi's death and transition to cult saint status takes place in a sharply visualised political and strategic landscape, the landscape of eighteenth-century warfare and state-building. In these south Indian cult traditions the struggle between pir and demon, conqueror and real-life adversary is played out in a real historical setting, amongst the strongholds and battle sites of the Walahjah domain.

Sometimes these traditions established links for the saint with the most feared and celebrated of south India's eighteenth-century military men, Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan of Mysore. Saiyid Mustafa Shahid of Kulathur came to be described by his devotees as a *shahid*-companion of Tipu, and some of the Trichy pirs have also been identified in these terms. Similarly the wrathful Trichy saint Saiyid Fariddudin Shahid whose shrine was

<sup>1</sup> On Sufis and the concept of *jihad*, see Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, pp. 34–5.

supposed to have been defiled by the presence of a military prison is said in some accounts to have served as a commander in the Mysore army. As befits a cult which focuses on traditions of warrior rule and domain-building, Saiyid Fariduddin turns out to be yet another pir whose legends are full of severing and dismemberment: the saint undergoes his glorious exemplary martyrdom by being 'hacked to death by enemy unbelievers'.<sup>2</sup>

Some of these tomb shrines really do contain the remains of eighteenth-century soldiers, and it is not surprising that the grave of someone associated with blood-taking and violence should come to be transformed into a potent local holy place: among the people whom we now identify as Hindus, this is how deified hero figures (pattavans or virulus) come to be added to the pantheon of regional power divinities. At the same time, though, the many martial cult traditions which date from the early centuries of Muslim penetration usually came to acquire new identifications which linked them to the events and personalities of the eighteenth century. The invader-hero Saiyid Ibrahim of Eruvadi possessed one set of biographical traditions which located him fairly securely in the twelfth century. Later on, however, the Eruvadi saint also came to be described as an eighteenth-century Afghan mercenary who died in battle in the Ramnad Marava country. It was probably at this point, in the course of the warfare and 'fitna' of the eighteenth-century, that the Saiyid Ibrahim shrine became a major south Indian pilgrimage place. It grew to be especially popular among Tamil maraikkaiyar and Labbai worshippers, and these devotees had no difficulties with the apparent contradictions in the cult legend. The Eruvadi pir was still a terrible warlike hero; the two traditions came to merge and overlap, and the saint was regarded simply as an even more powerful figure because the world in which he moved and performed his miracles had become so much more concrete and accessible, and was now directly associated with the real-life battlegrounds and military men of the poligar country.<sup>3</sup>

One sign of this added power is the fact that the Eruvadi saint went on to become a successful dominion-builder in his own right. Like the Trichy pir Nathar Wali, who also came to be revered as the ultimate master or khalifa of many subordinate south Indian pirs, Saiyid Ibrahim acquired an ever-growing network of saints who came to be identified as

<sup>2</sup> *Bahar*, p. 58; Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', pp. 18, 74. Some martial pirs, for example the Afghan military saint Hazarat Saiyid Khanbaba of Salem, are said to have died serving the Walahjahs. (Suharwardy, p. 66.) The Salem pir Hazarat Shah Fateh Shah Wali (*ibid.*, p. 68) and Hazarat Saiyid Rustam Shahid of Lalgudi, twelve miles from Trichy (*ibid.*, p. 24) are also martial figures. Among the Sufis with legendary links to Haidar and Tipu is the Pudukkottai saint Saiyid Arif-ullah Jafar Shah Hajwiri. Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Sali, *Tamilakattu Tarkakkal*, pp. 176–81; Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', p. 60.

his one-time disciples and subjects. Some of these were perceived as conventional Sufi adepts rather than soldiers, like the eighteenth-century mystic Muhidin Kalipa Vali whose dargah is in Ekkakudi, nine miles from Kilakkarai. (Kalipa is the Tamil rendering of khalifa.) This Sufi is described as a mystical adept from Arabia who travelled through north India and then on to Ramnad where he had an experience of miraculous foreknowledge while presiding over a gathering of devotees at the Eruvadi dargah.<sup>4</sup> But most of Saiyid Ibrahimim's other associated disciple-saints were military men, some of whom were said to have joined an expedition to rescue him from his last fatal battle. These subordinate hero pirs include a figure named 'Siniappa' ('sugar father', supposedly a Tamilisation of the Muslim name Yazin, and a reference to the sweet balm which flows to the pir's devotees); this saint came to be identified as one of the Eruvadi saint's slain soldiers. There is an obvious parallel here with the armies of subordinate spirits and minor divinities led by Aiyanar and the region's other power divinities. These saints were not seen to be 'un-Islamic' figures, however. For example Siniappa was praised in the works of one of the region's leading maraikkayar devotional poets, Saiyid Muhammad Alim of Kilakkarai: once again the warrior cult tradition transcended the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' or learned and unscriptural religion.<sup>5</sup>

All this might seem to relate to the literature of the militarised Muslim 'frontier' as described by Wittek for early Ottoman society, and more recently by Stephen Dale for the Malabar coast. The warrior pir would be understood as an embodiment of violent communal confrontation. His cult legends would embody a retelling of the region's initial conquest by Muslim invaders, and the pir would be seen as an austere Islamic champion waging holy war against enemy unbelievers – Hindu unbelievers in this case. This would imply that when the process of subjugation was complete and Islam began to be disseminated by peaceful and assimilative means, the former invaders would reach a cultural and political accommodation with local peoples. As a result the crude aggressive martial saint would fade away, and his place would be taken by a much wider array of Sufi types; Sufis would appear in the devotional literature as courtiers and ascetics, scholars and literary men, and it would be at this point that Sufi texts and cult traditions would come to mix and intermingle with those of the local Hindus.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Sali, *Tamilakattu Tarkakkal*, pp. 197–8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 195–6.

<sup>6</sup> On the role of the warrior Sufi in the Deccan, see Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, pp. xxviii–xxxii, 38–9. See also Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier*, pp. 59–60, 67; Paul Wittek, *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire* (London, 1938).

Although this formulation has done much to place the process of Islamisation in an accessible historical framework, it does not really work for this part of southern India. For one thing the chronology is wrong: the south already possessed a full array of Sufi types and personages at the time when this new historically-focused ghazi pir tradition was coming to the fore. If anything, the process was the reverse of the one described above. Such saints as Shah Alimullah Qadiriyya (or 'Shams Paran') of Trichy, one of the pirs with a dramatic Vaishnavite cobra image in his cult texts, were known first as literati and scholar-Sufis, even as rigorous 'Islamic' ulama, and were subsequently endowed with an explicitly martial character: there is the account of Shams Paran in the *Bahar* volume in which the pir defeats wrestlers and fends off swordsmen. The role of state power in these traditions was very different as well. The nawabi was far from being regarded as an alien conquest state, and the grafting of new martial identifications onto the region's established cult traditions coincided with the spread of new and learned Sufi networks and with the expansion of nawabi support for foundations such as the élite Vellore Hazarat Makan and the great 'popular' shrine of Shahul Hamid of Nagore.

Furthermore, given the weakness of communal and sectarian boundaries in south India, it is hard to conceive of anyone in the south who regarded Nathar Wali or the pirs of Eruvadi and Penukonda as slayers of a narrowly defined 'Hindu' enemy. 'Communal' themes, an awareness of distinctions and conflicts between aliens and indigenes or between groups defined explicitly as Hindus and Muslims, clearly did appear in the texts and cult traditions, but even in the late eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries there is no sign that these south Indian warrior figures were beginning to give ground to a more 'sophisticated' or uncontentious form of Sufi personality. The martial pir was not a divisive being in south Indian society. On the contrary, he was a figure of universal power with deep roots in the world of the Tamil goddess cults and power divinities. His origins were both local and external, and he was certainly not received as a mere intruder bearing alien norms and doctrines. When he fought against 'enemy unbelievers', even when he was slain and dismembered by them, it was known that the ghazi pir would end up by absorbing them into his realm. Thus his ultimate victory was not perceived as the triumph of Hindu over Muslim; these battles correspond to the intermingling of identities which links the goddess with her demonic counterpart.

The Kulathur saint Saiyid Mustafa Shahid is typical of the many saints who acquired seemingly incompatible biographical traditions. There is one strand in the local accounts which identifies him as a contemporary and murid (disciple) of Nathar Wali, and the other which declares him to

have been a shahid-companion of Tipu Sultan. Once again, though, these are mutually reinforcing traditions. In both cases the saint has been identified with personalities who embody sovereign power and ascendancy; Tipu the armed invader becomes a realisation of the domain which has been claimed for the coming Muslim conquerors by Nathar Wali and the other great precursor Sufis. This interweaving of the Tipu and Nathar Wali traditions points again to the way in which the region's sacred and political landscapes came to overlap and interpenetrate in this period. Even more important is the fact that Tipu and Nathar Wali are treated as universal figures of power in this tradition: the dominion which they establish is all-embracing, and they are not representatives of an exclusive or militantly anti-Hindu Islamic identity.<sup>7</sup>

The Pudukkottai pir Kat Bava ('forest father') came to possess an even more complex series of identifications. What has emerged in this case are biographies which present the saint as an elemental figure of power from the distant and semi-mythical past, while also associating him with three separate and much more specific historical personalities. There is the central core legend in which the saint is Kat Bava the nameless forest father and preserver of the seven threatened goddess-maidens. At the same time a second biographical tradition asserts that the saint was a real-life disciple of the great Nagore master Shahul Hamid. A third strand in the devotional lore identifies him as the eldest son of the Nagore saint's heir and successor Muhammad Yusuf. And finally – again demonstrating the impact of the real-life Mysorean invaders in these cult traditions – there was also a widespread view of Kat Bava as a general in the army of Haidar Ali of Mysore.<sup>8</sup>

One of the richest of these mixed biographical traditions has grown up around the figure of Shaikh Sultan Sikandar whose most important cult shrine is located on top of a 1,000-foot rock crag at Tirupparankunram, four miles southwest of Madurai. As has already been shown (see above p. 109) this is one of many hilltop sites in Tamilnad at which a Muslim saint figure has become identified with Skanda/Subrahmanya, the Hindu warrior deity who was created to lead a celestial army against the powers of demonic darkness. The similarity in names has served to reinforce this fusion of identities: to the large numbers of Hindus and Muslims who have frequented the site, it has been known both as Skandalalai and as Sikandarmalai (Skanda's or Sikandar's mount). Although most of the biographical accounts portray this saint as the potent pre-Islamic hero Sikandar-i-Azam, Alexander the Great, he has also acquired a series of more localised identifications. In some versions the Tirupparankunram

<sup>7</sup> Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

cult saint appears as '*faqir Sikandar*', a non-martial Muslim holy man who settled in Madurai and established his khanaqah on the Sikandarmalai at some unspecified point in the distant past. There is at least one tradition, though, which relates the saint to the Ramnad hero Shaikh Ibrahim Shahid of Eruvadi. In this version of the cult story Sikandar is a warrior hero who leads an expedition to the Tamil country to rescue Shaikh Ibrahim from the enemies who bring about his martyrdom. Finally there is another version of the Sikandar tradition which represents the saint as a soldier who died in the service of Malik Kafur, the fourteenth-century commander who campaigned in south India in the name of the Khalji sultans of Delhi.<sup>9</sup>

During the nawabi era the Sikandar tradition gained widespread popularity in the Tamil country. As in the case of the supposedly 'popular' cult of Shahul Hamid of Nagore, the devotees of the Madurai Sikandar included eminent south Indian Muslim literary men as well as a large 'mass' following. As has been seen, the Nagore shrine was a long-standing coastal foundation with a strong tradition of maraikkayar patronage. Under the Walajahs it was then drawn into the religious networks of the nawabi court and was recognised and revered by some of the region's most accomplished Dakhni literary men. The history of the Sikandar shrine reflects this process in reverse: during the eighteenth century this was a site of particular importance to the Dakhnis and other non-Tamil martial communities of the Madurai region, and it subsequently acquired more widespread popularity among the Tamil maraikkayar. This can be seen in the work of one of the main popularisers of the shrine and its cult, the Qadiriyya Sufi poet Kunankuti Mastan Sahib (1800–47). This literary man was a maraikkayar who had been strongly influenced by the works of the Tamil *sittars* (tantric adepts) and the seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Tamil Hindu mystic Tayumanavar.<sup>10</sup> One of the poet's major verse compositions (part of the collection known as the *Mastan Saheb Padalgal*) deals with the power of the Tirupparankunram shrine: it was here that he experienced a profound mystical awakening while undergoing a period of *chilla* (forty days of seclusion and enraptured meditation.) This poet-mystic was one of the most 'syncretic' of all Tamil Muslim Sufis. His association with the Sikandar tradition suggests once again that the martial cult personalities of Tamilnad were perceived as all-embracing figures of power, and did not embody any militant or exclusive sense of Islamic identity.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58–9.

<sup>10</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 451–2; Zvelebil, *Tamil Literature*, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> This is one of the many south Indian dargahs at which there are Hindu-style architectural features, most notably a pillared *mantapam* (ceremonial hall or platform) resembling those found in Tamil temples.

One of the most striking features of these martial cult traditions is the way in which they came to interweave the real events and personalities of the eighteenth-century with standard Sufi miracle motifs, and with themes and traditions drawn from the worship of indigenous power divinities and Hindu high gods. This is the case for example in the biographical traditions which are known to the pirzadas and devotees at a small but much-frequented tomb shrine known as the Khawjamalai taykal. This is another hilltop site: the shrine is situated on the outskirts of Trichy, and here too there is a strong association with the worship of Subrahmanya. Again there are two distinct strands to the biographical traditions maintained at this site. One part of the tradition identifies the pir as a spiritual heir of the great Trichy master Nathar Wali. In these accounts the saint is endowed with all the genealogical and spiritual antecedents of a conventional institutional Sufi.<sup>12</sup> In the second of these two biographical traditions, however, the Khawjamalai pir becomes a fierce avenger who displays his powers in the much more immediate world of the Anglo-French military confrontations of the 1750s. The most colourful of these accounts declares that the commander of the British garrison tried to usurp the saint's hilltop meditation site so that he could use it as an artillery emplacement. In order to defeat the saint the general sends up a beautiful naked temptress to parade before him and seduce him from his state of enraptured meditation. Naturally the scheme fails: without breaking his trance, the pir turns the woman to stone with a single blazing annihilating glance, and the English forces retire defeated and confounded.<sup>13</sup>

### Yusuf Khan: pir, god and ruler

The most celebrated of south India's warrior saints is Muhammad Yusuf Khan, a martial pir and power divinity who still commands veneration across much of Madurai, Ramnad and Tirunelveli districts. Again this is a

<sup>12</sup> See above, pp. 75–6. This saint of Deccani origin is named in the accounts as Khawja Ahmad Shah Husayni Chishti. 'Khawja' indicates initiation into the 'fundamentalist' Naqshbandiya Sufi order; such formal tariqa affiliations are rare among south Indian qalandars. This is the saint who spent twelve years meditating before the tomb of Nathar Wali: when a flower fell into his lap from the tomb's garland he knew that he had been given the sign to found his own khanaqah at Khawjamalai. Suharwardy, 'Sufis of Tamilnad', pp. 21–2.

<sup>13</sup> Oral accounts collected at the dargah, March 1984. As at Nágore, this pir's devotees connect the saint's terrible power with his renunciation of womankind. The story also invites comparison with Hindu legends in which temptresses are sent to seduce meditating sages. Crucial here is the notion of power and its containment: copulation is seen to drain and dissipate the ascetic's superhuman energies. For a comparable Tamil pattavan legend, see Baliga, *Madura*, p. 404.

cult which grew up around the figure of a real eighteenth-century personality. In his lifetime Khan 'the rebel commandant' was an outstanding military leader, one of the most distinguished soldiers in the East India Company's service, and for a time the founder of an independent realm carved out from within the nawab's own domains. This dashing figure was much admired by the British military men who fought with him against Haidar Ali and the French between 1754 and 1759. He appears in contemporary letters and memoirs as 'the gallant Issoof Cawn', hero of many campaigns against the French, the invading Mysore forces and the Madurai and Tirunelveli poligars. Even when it was known that Khan had at last 'thrown off the mask' and 'declared for himself' against the nawab's authority, there were some Company officers who tried to persuade their superiors to discard the Walahjahs and make an alliance with this 'artfull and experienced soldier'.<sup>14</sup> He, rather than Muhammad Ali, it was said, stood a good chance of subduing the southern poligar country and making its warrior chiefs pay the tribute (or 'poligar peshkash') which no-one, certainly not the nawab, had yet been able to extract from them.<sup>15</sup>

How then did Yusuf Khan become a cult saint and power divinity, and how did he appear in the eyes of the Tamils and Dakhnis who came to venerate him? As a pir, Yusuf Khan has been perceived as a figure of concrete and relatively recent historical antecedents. The texts and biographical traditions do not endow him with the qualities of a conventional Sufi: although they extol his miraculous powers and exploits, he has never been portrayed as an itinerant holy man or mystical adept or as a figure of the remote past. This then is a being who began as an eighteenth-century warrior and aspiring dominion-builder and ended up as a cult saint and power divinity. Similar traditions are known in much of north India, particularly in Bengal and the Punjab where there are also blood-spilling cult heroes and conqueror pirs. Thus although the ghazi-shahid need not be dismissed as a primitive or divisive version of the Muslim cult saint, it can be assumed that at least some of these traditions relate to the initial expansion of Islam in societies which had not previously possessed an established Muslim dynastic tradition.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Pelling to Orme, 4 June 1763, Orme MSS OV Pt 1, vol. 30 p. 35; 'Sunca Ramma' to Orme, 6 Nov. 1763, *ibid.* p. 45, IOL. See also Orme, *Indostan*, II, p. 251, 398–459; *Tuzak*, II, pp. 152, 215–38, 274–80.

<sup>15</sup> Gen. [formerly Cpt.] Joseph Smith to Orme, [date oblit.] 1776, Orme MSS OV Pt 1, vol. 62, p. 51. Pelling to Orme, Madras 4 June 1763, Orme MSS OV Pt 1, vol. 30, pp. 35. 'Sunca Ramma' to Orme, Ft ST G., 6 Nov. 1763, Orme MSS OV Pt 1, p. 45: the letter eulogises Khan's 'faithfull services' 'during the French siege of Madras in 1758. S.C. Lushington, Collector of 'Poligar Peshkash' during the anti-poligar campaigns of 1798–1802, was another of Khan's admirers. See BOR 3580/29 May 1802/pp. 147–78/TNA.

It is also likely that the creation of the warrior cults made it possible for Muslim rulers and conquerors to be absorbed or 'domesticated' into the culture of their new subject peoples. The building of new Muslim domains in this very early period of Muslim expansion would have gone hand in hand with the forging of the pirs' devotional traditions. What makes Khan so interesting as a warrior pir is the fact that he made his leap into the supernatural in the relatively recent past, rather than in the days of Mahmud of Ghazni whose armies conquered and annexed the Punjab in the early eleventh century, or at the time of the thirteenth century Khalji overlords of Bengal. In this case, then, it is possible to observe how Khan the would-be ruler actually set about constructing his new regime, and how the cult tradition followed on from these historical events. In north India we can only infer that this is what took place, and very little can be deduced about the reception of these new warrior lords by local people. This gives the story of the 'rebel commandant' an even greater interest: here the process can be observed from both sides, from the point of view of Khan the aspiring ruler, and also from that of Khan's conquered subjects and client groups, amongst whom he was ultimately transformed into a divinity and cult saint.<sup>16</sup>

From the early 1750s until his capture and execution in 1764, Yusuf Khan was a major force in the politics of the Carnatic. Like many other 'new men' of the eighteenth-century he was of modest origins, and it is thought that he began his career as a trooper in service to Muhammad Kamal of Nellore, a Muslim warlord who owed allegiance to the Navaayat 'usurper' and would-be dynast Chanda Sahib.<sup>17</sup> By 1748 Khan had followed the path taken by other successful military adventurers of the period: he formed his own cavalry troop and managed to sell his services to a series of new and more promising patrons. In the early 1750s he was recruited by Robert Clive, and by 1754 he had risen to command the whole of the East India Company's sepoy force in the Carnatic. By all accounts Khan was an exceptionally skilled soldier. One of his most celebrated feats was the storming of the 'Kallar barrier' at Mannapparai, thirty miles south of Trichy; this exploit took place in 1755 while Khan was campaigning with a force of Arcot and Company troops in the wild southern poligar country. The barrier was a complex of thorn-hedge barricades and earth-work fortifications; because of Khan's victory the most powerful of the southern Kallar chiefs was forced for the first time to

<sup>16</sup> Eaton describes a fourteenth-century Muslim conqueror who was re-identified as a martial pir and ghazi in Bengal. 'Islam in Bengal', pp. 25–6.

<sup>17</sup> Khan is described variously as a low-caste Tamil convert, as a maraikkayar and as a Dakhni of learned *alim* stock: clearly many south Indian Muslim groups have sought to claim and incorporate him.

pay the full poligar 'peshkash' tribute claimed by the nawab. It was from this point that his British admirers began to see him as a more desirable ally than Muhammad Ali.<sup>18</sup>

In 1756 the nawab and his British backers were faced with a new crisis. The strongest of the region's Marava poligars had forged a menacing new alliance; they then added to this threat by recruiting some of the nawab's disaffected Pathan soldiery, and there were signs that they were likely to receive support from Haidar Ali, the raja of Travancore and a surviving son of the Navaiyat 'rebel' Chanda Sahib.<sup>19</sup> Muhammad Ali was prepared to cut his losses: he proposed to the Company that he should abandon Trichy as his capital and shift the court to the old Navaiyat centre at Arcot. It was at this point that Khan was given command of all the forces – nawabi troops as well as Company sepoy – who had been campaigning in the poligar country. His reputation soared even higher when he scored a series of victories against Haidar Ali's Mysorean forces. Over the next three years the 'rebel commandant' had unprecedented success in warring down the Marava and Kallar warrior groups who dominated large areas of the Tirunelveli and Madurai poligar country. By 1759, when he was installed as provincial commander at Madurai, Khan had established himself as the dominant military power in the southern Carnatic. He was also named renter of the nawab's southern districts, and this combination of military and revenue-taking power placed him in the ideal position to launch his celebrated 'rebellion'.<sup>20</sup>

This supposed act of sedition was no more than an attempt to carve out an independent realm like that of any other new eighteenth-century ruler, including the nawab himself: to use Wink's terminology it can be seen as a classic exercise in 'fitna'. In order to found the new state, Yusuf Khan's first requirement was to create an army of his own, and the 'rebel commandant' was well placed to achieve this. First, even before he managed to build up his own revenue apparatus, he managed to secure a strong fiscal base: 'As it is not the harvest I borrow money of the Sauacers [soucars] and pay the troops, and dispatch the business. If the Peishanam crop and the receiving the rents [*sic*] in advance safely comes into my hand, I can find some means, but on this account a disturbance is arisen on all sides but God will protect thro' [*sic*] his mercy.'<sup>21</sup> Secondly, he had the

<sup>18</sup> Eyewitness account in Orme MSS OV Pt 2, vol. 3, pp. 532, 746–7, 608. IOL.

<sup>19</sup> Kadhivel, *History of the Maravas*, p. 118; Orme, *Indostan*, I, pp. 399–434.

<sup>20</sup> Khan's letters evoke the region's turbulence: 'When a disturbance on one side of this country is quelled, there arises a fresh one in another, it appears to me that providence ordered this province to be a source of troubles. I am ready night and day under arms ready to fight and oppose' Khan to Cpt. Caillaud, 15 Jan. 1758, Orme MSS OV Pt 1, vol. 51, pp. 115–16, IOL.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

soldiers: his campaigns had been waged in the home domains of some of the south's most experienced warriors, and most of his new force was recruited from amongst the same Kallar and Marava clansmen who had recently been fighting against him.<sup>22</sup>

This is not as paradoxical as it might seem: once Yusuf Khan had ceased to be an agent of nawabi overlordship the warriors of the southern poligar domains were eager to take service in his new force. There were two reasons for this. First, one of Yusuf Khan's greatest strengths was his ability to represent himself as heir to the Hindu nayaka rulers of Madurai. This was just what the Navaiyat 'renegade' Chanda Sahib had tried to do when he mounted his own challenge to the Walahjah nawab in 1736, but Khan was much more successful at invoking the idea of nayaka successorship. As a result he was able to provide a crucial measure of endorsement and recognition for the poligar chiefs with whom he was allied, and because of this, many of the poligars viewed his overlordship as significantly more attractive than that of the nawab. Secondly, in defeating these fierce Tamil warrior groups he had provided the best possible proof of his skills as a commander. The men who served him had every reason to believe that he could bring them glory and plunder, and by 1762 Yusuf Khan had a following of over 27,000 men. These included Europeans: like most of the period's other aspiring rulers, Khan acquired a set of foreign mercenary officers – mostly Frenchmen – to train his new force.<sup>23</sup>

Burhan Ibn Hasan's *Tuzak-i-Walahjahi* takes a predictably harsh view of the 'rebel commandant'. The chronicler's line in this work is that Yusuf Khan was the favoured protégé of the nawab, that Muhammad Ali loaded him with honours and office and that Khan then revealed his 'bad nature', that is his lack of moral worth, by rebelling against his protector and overlord. This account provides valuable evidence about the way in which the Walahjahs perceived Yusuf Khan's 'rebellion'. For this 'wronged' ruling house Khan's regime was illicit and must therefore demonstrate its illegitimacy through acts of cruelty and extortion. Thus, according to Burhan, 'He [Yusuf Khan] murdered the servants of the *sarkar*, oppressed the poor and the rich and tyrannised the zamindars'. What is clear from Burhan's text, though, is how closely the 'rebel commandant's' state-building tactics resembled those of India's other aspiring eighteenth-century rulers, and the work provides a vivid picture of Khan's techniques of military recruitment and alliance building.

<sup>22</sup> In another sense Khan could never cease to be part of the nawab's political system. To the Walahjahs, Khan the aspiring ruler would always be a rebel subject who had won his Kallar allies by sedition and 'fitna'. See Wink, *Land and Sovereignty*.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Pelling to Orme, Madras 9 Nov. 1763, Orme MSS OV Pt 1, vol. 30, p. 50, IOL.

He [Yusuf Khan] allied himself with mischief-makers... sought the support of Haydar Ali Khan [Haidar Ali of Mysore], brought together five hundred French who ran away after the fall of Phulcheri [Pondicherry, captured from the French in 1761] got ready innumerable guns, gun-powder, flint-stone, and cannon from... ports that belonged to the frang [European] communities, carried on correspondence with the nazim [Nizam] of the Deccan [Hyderabad] by sending presents and gifts with a view to obtain from him titles and mansabs... made a pact with two divisions of Kallars in the east and west of Madura; thus he found himself a great sardar. He imagined that the kingdom was his own and forgot the past...

He strengthened the fort of Madura with fresh fortifications, widened and deepened the ditch filling it with water and crocodiles, and broadened the maydan [maidan: open space around the fort] raising its level.<sup>24</sup>

Khan's other moves also fell into line with those of his domain-building contemporaries. He founded *ganjs* or market centres in his own name, rather than that of his patron and overlord Muhammad Ali. (One of the largest of these was Khansapuram or Khan-Sahibpuram, in the Marava-ruled Ramnad black-soil country.)<sup>25</sup> He also began to make his own revenue assignments. This was an even more unambiguous assertion of state power: as long as he served the nawab, Yusuf Khan was charged with the collection of 'peshkash' payments from the poligars, and in the eyes of both the nawab and his British patrons his 'rebellion' was as much a matter of the cessation of revenue payments to the nawab's treasury as of the mobilisation of troops.

Having cut off the flow of tribute to the nawab, Yusuf Khan was still left with the task of conjuring up his own body of revenue-takers in a region which distinctly lacked the literate entrepreneurial and service people who fulfilled this function in other new eighteenth-century domains. Here again, though, Yusuf Khan's command of the poligar country stood him in good stead. Like the longer-lived new rulers of the period, he actually did start to make formal revenue assignments, using titles and service ranks which followed the conventions of Mughal administration. Since there were no other likely candidates, he vested the office of *jagirdar* (an assignment of land revenue) in the most substantial of his newly allied Kallar poligars. It may seem incongruous to find these battle-scarred Tamil plainsmen assuming the titles of the Persianate north Indian service gentry, but then most of Khan's contemporaries had

<sup>24</sup> *Tuzak*, II, p. 278. Khan claimed that all his 'rebel' moves were in his patrons' interests. 'I am busy night and day in making repairs and carrying on the works on all sides... I am by the means of the Company's bread which I eat taking great care and pains and using my utmost endeavours and in short nothing shall be wanting on my side in the Company's affairs.' Khan to Cpt. Caillaud 15 Feb. 1758 Orme MSS OV Pt 1, p. 113.

<sup>25</sup> Turnbull, 'Memoir', p. 116.

an equally eclectic approach to statecraft. Indeed by initiating this unlikely metamorphosis of Hindu poligars into jagirdars, Khan was able to incorporate some of the region's most formidable military groups into his new regime. This enabled him to create a system of revenue management which was much envied by a later generation of British revenue officers. In the early decades of the nineteenth century the 'Collectors of Poligar Peshkash' found it almost impossible to impose a settled tribute on the southern palaiyams, and they were much impressed to find that the 'rebel commandant' had been able to levy a cash revenue demand on large tracts of the poligar country. The result, according to contemporary observers, was a remarkable if short-lived transformation of the region's political economy.

While he [Khan] ruled those provinces, his whole administration denoted vigour and effect. . . his maxim was, that the labourer and the manufacturer should be the favourite children of the Circar, because they afford strength and comfort to the public parent.<sup>26</sup>

In his attempts to maximise resources and in his forging of new webs of alliance and affiliation, Yusuf Khan's system of rule bears comparison with those of Martanda Varma of Travancore and even his own former patron Muhammad Ali Walajah. There were other similarities too, particularly in the way that he balanced 'orthodox' and 'syncretic' acts of piety and benefaction. While he supported important Muslim foundations in the key military centres of his new domain, he is also remembered as a patron of Madurai's most celebrated Hindu shrine, the temple of Sri Minaksi Sundaresvarar.<sup>27</sup>

Despite these initial successes Yusuf Khan failed in his bid to found a dynastic state in the southern Carnatic. His attempts to forge links with Haidar Ali and the French marked him out as a real threat to the Company's interests, and so in 1763 the British joined the nawab's forces in an attack on Yusuf Khan's stronghold at Madurai. This assault turned into a sixteen-month siege which ended when the 'rebel commandant' was betrayed and handed over to the siege force by one of his French mercenaries. Khan was hanged on the nawab's orders in October 1764; he was buried nearby in what is now the hamlet of Samattipuram on the outskirts of Madurai.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Fullarton, *View of the English Interest*, p. 139; Extracts Madras Country Correspondence 1 Jan. 1757 – 1 Mar. 1758, Orme MSS OV Pt 1, vol. 51, pp. 40–9, IOL.

<sup>27</sup> See Marathi 'memorandum' of temple inams, 1806, translated 14 Feb. 1808, in 'Collection of Stalla Mahat'yams or Legends. . . and Historical Accounts of the . . . chief places of Hindoo worship in the southern countries of the Peninsula', Mackenzie Collection – General, vol. 16, pp. 73–7, IOL.

<sup>28</sup> 'Sunca Ramma' to Orme, Ft St George, 24 Oct. 1764. Orme MSS OV Pt 1, vol. 30, p. 57,

### The Khan cult in Tamilnad

This was not the end of the story. Khan's grave site soon began to acquire a reputation for healing and other miraculous properties, and in 1807–8 a Tamil Muslim trader financed the construction of a dome over the grave. By the 1820s the site had become a well-known place of pilgrimage.<sup>29</sup> Some years later two mosques were constructed near the original burial place. Khan the general and martyred state-builder was now re-identified as Khan Sahib Avliya – Khan the lord-wali or pir, and his grave site acquired all the elements of a fully institutionalised dargah. There were pirsadas and shrine officiants, and at some point in the nineteenth century the shrine began to sponsor an annual kanturi (an *urs* or death anniversary festival) featuring the standard Tamil santanakuttam (sandal-paste anointing) rite.<sup>30</sup>

Far from being an example of a 'parochial' south Asian saint cult, the Yusuf Khan tradition was rapidly transported to new localities and was soon dispersed across a wide stretch of the southern Tamil poligar country (the modern districts of Madurai, Ramnad and Tirunelveli). The spread of the cult was closely tied to the rather grisly trail of *dissecta membra* which was marked out by Khan's devotees soon after his execution. The Samattipuram dargah contained the hero's head and torso; his extremities were carried off to new localities where they were displayed as objects of veneration and then interred in burial sites which became cult centres in their own right.

Offshoot shrines of this sort were founded in the fortress town of Dindigul and also in Nattam twenty miles north of Madurai) which is located in a region where the 'rebel commandant' had recruited many of his Kallar warriors. The most powerful fragment was the severed hand of Yusuf Khan which was despatched to the village of Tenput near Melapalaiyam and interred there in the grounds of a small masjid (mosque). The importance attached to this entombed hand may be related in part to the element of popular Shia devotion which features in Muslim worship in this part of Tirunelveli – even though the Muslim

IOL. A 'fitna'-like explanation of Khan's career comes from one officer's advice 'never [again] to place independent power in the hands of a Mussulman, for most assuredly, sooner or later, he will throw off his Allegiance and become a competitor for dominion against your [the Company's] Authority'. Notes by Richard Smith n.d. [1763–4] Orme MSS OV Pt 1, vol. 88, pp. 182–3, IOL.

<sup>29</sup> 'A Field Officer of Cavalry' [D. Mackworth], *Diary of a Tour Through Southern India, Egypt and Palestine in the Years 1821 and 1822* (London, 1823), p. 50.

<sup>30</sup> Interviews, Madurai and Madras, Jan. – Feb. 1983; Asadullah Khan, 'Yusuf Khan's life and work – a fresh study', M. Phil. dissertation, University of Madras, 1980, pp. 31, 107–9.

population is overwhelmingly Sunni here as in the rest of the south.<sup>31</sup>

More generally these dismembered fragments served as a medium for the cult's expansion because like the main burial site, they were perceived as being imbued with Khan's barakat. By calling attention to the hero's violent death, the hand and other fragments associated Khan with the tradition of the ghazi-shahid or victim-hero. Here too the saint's martyrdom is inflicted by enemy unbelievers, in this case by Yusuf Khan's French betrayer and the nawab's British backers. At the same time the corpse fragments provided a graphic evocation of the blood, carnage and demonic power which were the hallmarks of the south Indian pir and of the goddess. The veneration of Yusuf Khan's dismembered fragments also suggests a parallel with the Hindu myth of Purusa. In the Rg Veda the cosmos is formed when the gods sacrifice and dismember Purusa, the primordial man: the separated parts of his body become the four great castes or *varnas* into which all mankind is divided.<sup>32</sup>

These themes of sacrifice and dismemberment are also linked to the notion of sovereign power. As a pir or cult saint Yusuf Khan becomes lord of his devotees. They partake of his barakat, and in so doing they are expressing submission and fealty, accepting the claim of spiritual dominion which is implicit in the role and identity of the pir. Khan then is a pir who has been slaughtered like Kat Bava, in fact slaughtered and dismembered like the butchered Trichy saint Saiyid Fariduddin Shahid. As in the case of the Nagore saint Shahul Hamid and Baba Fakiruddin of Penukonda whose followers dismember and eat the divine bull Nandi, there is a sense in which the devotees who venerate Khan's dismembered fragments are consuming or partaking of his body: in a very literal sense they are assimilating or ingesting the pir's barakat. It is in this way that the devotee becomes a subject within the realm of the pir. More specifically he has become a sharer in that realm and a sharer in the power of the saint: he has consumed the essence of Yusuf Khan, and in return he has been incorporated into the pir's domain.

This theme of dismemberment is a conspicuous feature in many of the Tamil country's other cult narratives. The most obvious parallel is the siting of the headless corpse of Chanda Sahib within the Nathar Wali dargah. Both of these slaughtered hero figures were would-be sovereigns. The difference is that Khan became a reigning pir as lord of his own

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84. Melapalaiyam has long been the site of a major Mohurram festival. Local Muslims may relate the veneration of Khan's hand to the panja or hand symbol which has such a wide range of sacred meanings in the Muslim world. Apart from being carried in Mohurram processions, panjas were used as amulets and protective emblems. In the eighteenth century metal panjas were attached to soldiers' helmets; the Wallace Collection in London has an Indian helmet of this type.

<sup>32</sup> I am grateful to Dr André Wink for suggesting this parallel.

supernatural vilayat or cult network; Chanda Sahib was successfully subordinated by the victorious Walahjabs when he was interred as a subject within the precincts of the Nathar Wali dargah.

As to the separation and dispersal of the pir's corpse fragments, this too is a motif which relates to the theme of dominion and sovereignty. The body of one of the pirs of Papavur, for example, is said to have been divided up and interred in eleven different burial places.<sup>33</sup> As in the case of the Mylapore saint Dastagir Sahib, the process involved a marking out of the territory or vilayat of the saint. For the devotees of Yusuf Khan the hero's spiritual domain was built up along the same lines as any 'real' eighteenth-century realm. In the region's pre-colonial regimes all those groups who were given rank and ceremonial 'honours' in the new state system were perceived as sharers in the power of their reigning lord. As the Khan cult took root, these two spheres of power came to overlap completely. The network of cult sites formed across the same terrain in which Yusuf Khan sought to create his independent kingdom. After his death this territory was traced out along the path taken by the severed fragments of the corpse as they were transported to the sites of his new cult shrines. It was through this fusion of Khan's vilayat or political domain with the sacred landscape in which the shrines were founded that the 'rebel commandant' made the transition from ruler to cult saint. After his death Khan's military and political power was simply redefined as the barakat of a reigning pir: the corporate state which he built up through alliances with his Kallars and the other affiliated groups who shared in his power was reshaped as a network of devotees sharing or partaking in their sovereign lord's barakat.

### **Khan, Kat Bava and the Tamil warrior groups**

Thus far Yusuf Khan has been seen as a real historical figure who was transformed into a reigning pir with the powers and attributes of a ghazi-shahid saint. Indeed if the Sufi is to be seen as an idealised Muslim ruler, then Yusuf Khan the slain hero and aspiring domain-builder fulfilled this ideal type more convincingly than almost any other south Indian cult figure. At the same time there was another dimension to the tradition of popular worship which grew up around the figure of Yusuf Khan. Throughout the period when the 'rebel commandant' was being endowed with the attributes of a pir – and when recognisably Islamic shrines were being founded as repositories of his barakat – there was a parallel tradition of worship evolving amongst local people, especially

<sup>33</sup> Sali, *Tamilakattu Tarkakkal*, p. 61.

amongst the warrior pastoralist groups who are now thought of as Hindus.

In this second cult tradition Yusuf Khan was perceived and worshipped as a deified martial hero with the same qualities and attributes as the blood-taking warrior gods of the poligar country. Like the pattavans and 'demonic' power divinities of the region, Yusuf Khan came to be seen as a deity who possessed the capacity to possess living human beings. In this form, too, Khan became the lord of a small but much frequented cult site which was established in the village of Rukmaniammalpuram, near Tenkasi in the present-day Tirunelveli district. This was not a dargah but a temple like those of the region's other non-vegetarian goddesses and male power divinities. Khan is still worshipped as its presiding deity; he receives blood offerings, and his worshippers carry out ear-boring, exorcisms and curing rituals just like those of a conventional sakti shrine. In the course of these rites the 'rebel commandant' is invoked by trance dancers whose bodies are taken over and possessed by Khan, and who make prophetic utterances on his behalf. His devotees include Muslims and Hindus of many different communities and caste groups, but he is a cult figure of particular importance for the Kallars and Maravas of southern Tamilnad.<sup>34</sup>

Since Yusuf Khan was a man of blood and violence whose deeds and attributes were as ambivalent as those any Tamil demon-god, it is not surprising that he was absorbed into the pantheon of south Indian martial pattavans and power divinities. Such a transformation was far from being unique in the Tamil country: many other Muslim personalities achieved cult status among groups who would now be thought of as conventional caste Hindus. As a result the Khan cult can be compared with that of another south Indian pir, the Pudukkottai saint Kat Bava, whose popularity also transcends the formal boundaries between Muslim and Hindu worship. Since at least the late eighteenth century and probably much earlier, the Pudukkottai 'forest father' has been revered as a special patron and guardian figure by a number of powerful Kallar lineages from this former poligar domain. The heads of these lineages still play a key role in the annual santanakuttam (sandal-paste anointing) at the Kat Bava shrine, and these acts became much-prized marks of primacy in the Kallars' local ranking schemes. The flag-hoisting (*koṭierram*) which signals the official start of the festival may take place only in the presence of these notables, and they also claim the privilege or ceremonial 'honour'

<sup>34</sup> Khan, 'Yusuf Khan's life and work', p. 109. The temple was probably built in the first half of the nineteenth century.

(*mariyātai*) of adorning the saint's tomb with garlands and cloths during the *kanturi*.<sup>35</sup>

These Kallar clans also have their own distinctive version of Kat Bava's biographical legend. As they tell the story, their own ancestors were the brigands who fought against the forest father in his battle to save the 'seven maidens'. They also say that these Kallar warriors actually killed and dismembered the pir in the course of their confrontation. When the pir is miraculously restored to life, the Kallars repent and acknowledge his power, and Kat Bava makes them his most favoured devotees. It is worth remembering that even in the eighteenth century, ex-pastoralists and warriors like the Kallars were still forming the sort of groups whom we now think of as 'traditional' Hindu castes, and that it was largely through the worship of corporate tutelaries and cult heroes that these groups began to acquire a sense of corporate or caste-like affinity.

Sometimes these tutelaries were deified gurus or holy men belonging to the formal Hindu pantheon. Quite often, though, it was the cult of a Sufi pir which came to provide a new corporate rallying point for such groups. The figure of Kat Bava is a case in point. What developed in Pudukkottai was a Tamil pir cult which was recast as an expression of the Kallars' newly formulated caste lifestyle – a caste lifestyle which took pride in meat-eating warrior customs rather than purity and Brahmanical abstinence. The story declares that Kat Bava's Kallars are men of such irresistible power that they could strike down a being of supernatural force and energy. Then, when they in turn are conquered and made to recognise the supremacy of the pir, they still emerge as his privileged followers – as subjects and co-sharers within the saint's spiritual domain.<sup>36</sup>

This too is a tradition which transcends all the possible levels of 'popular' and 'elite' culture, as well as the supposedly firm and fixed boundary between Hindus and Muslims. Throughout their period of rule, the Kat Bava shrine was supported and endowed by the Walajah

<sup>35</sup> Mr J. Rajamohamad is currently engaged in research on Muslim culture and society in the Pudukkottai region; it was he who directed my attention to the Kat Bava cult and its links with the Pudukkottai Kallars.

<sup>36</sup> The Marava and Kallar resembled many of the other communities who were coming to be constituted as caste groups during the later pre-colonial period. As was shown in chapter 1, this process of gradual caste formation affected artisans, priestly groups and traders as well as cattle-keepers and other semi-tribal martial groups. Throughout India such groups tended to cohere and organise around the veneration of deified holy men and other cult figures. See S. Narayana, *Andhra Pradesh District Gazetteers. Anantapur* (Hyderabad, 1970), pp. 123–4; S.C. Mitra, 'A curious Musulman sect (of the Dinajpur district in northern Bengal)', *QJMS* (n.s.) 27 (1936–7), pp. 402–8. For a comparable case from the Punjab, see Eaton, 'The political and religious authority of the shrine of Baba Farid', in B.D. Metcalf, ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 344–7.

nawabs, and by the avowedly Hindu Kallar 'little kings' of Pudukkottai. As a result the forest father's legend is not just a matter of oral 'folk' tradition: Kat Bava appears in Ghulam's Persian pilgrimage chronicle the *Bahar-i-Azam Jahi*. In this text Kat Bava becomes yet another eighteenth-century shahid (holy warrior) rather than a purely legendary figure. Here too the Kallars are recognised as the central figures in the story. Ghulam says that at some point in the 1760s the saint 'encountered with the *kallars*, a community of unbelievers, and died as a martyr at the age of fifty years'.<sup>37</sup>

What this text provides is a Persian-speaking Muslim nobleman's view of the Kallars: they are low 'kafirs', beings from beyond the pale of civilised Muslim culture. They are thus a kind of demonic enemy like the enemy demon or asura who is fought and vanquished by the Tamil warrior goddess. As a result, even though Kat Bava is clearly a wild qalandar, a 'heterodox' Sufi, the saint who is killed by the Kallars is a true martyr. His death is placed within the conventional pattern of exemplary martyrdom at the hands of the enemy unbeliever, the villainous 'kafir'. At the same time even this obviously hostile treatment of the Kallars acknowledges their importance: they are *necessary* to the story, and this reflects the fact that as warrior predators from the poligar country they were equally necessary to the survival of the nawabi as an Islamic realm. At some of the most critical moments in its history, the Pudukkottai Kallars entered into joint campaigns with the Walahjah nawab. By 1760 their ruler the Kallar Tondaiman had become an important recruit into the nawab's military alliance system; Pudukkottai Kallars served in the Walahjah army and helped to provision its forces, and in the confrontation with Yusuf Khan these Pudukkottai Kallar groups backed the nawab and not the 'rebel commandant'.<sup>38</sup>

The warrior clans are perceived in the Kat Bava story in the same way that many other urban ruling élites in the Muslim world have viewed the unsettled predator tribes of the desert or the central Asian steppe. They too are wild and dangerous, but they are also indispensable as recruits for the ruler's armies. Furthermore, in Russian Turkestan or Kazakhstan, for example, the warrior tribal groups were often thought of as persons who were still in the process of *becoming* Islamised. As the Muslim state incorporated them into its new domain, these groups – the tribal Kazakhs or Turkmen in this case – would eventually receive a more heightened consciousness of their Muslim identity through contact with the settled urban culture of the ruling townsmen.

<sup>37</sup> *Bahar*, p. 44. Kat Bava also appears in Pharoah's *Gazetteer* (p. 429) as a 'pious fakeer' who was martyred at the hands of 'Cullers'.

<sup>38</sup> Orme, *Indostan*, II, p. 673.

Here there is a parallel with the world of the Kallar and the Walahjah regime. In this poligar country, in almost the whole of the territory in which the nawabi came to be established, Hinduism, Islam and even Christianity were traditions which were all equally open and unsettled, all involved in a process of reconstitution and the gradual building of more stable institutions. Thus in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Walahjahs and their chroniclers could still perceive warrior predators such as the Kallars as potential Muslims, that is as the sort of people who actually did become absorbed into the wider Muslim population as a formal Islamic political tradition came into being, as in north India in the reign of the fourteenth and fifteenth-century Delhi sultans and their Mughal successors.

In the end, and despite their association with the Kat Bava pir cult, these Kallars did not actually become Muslims in a formal sense. This was partly because the whole process of being drawn to Muslim shrines and serving in Muslim armies started so much later in south India; and was occurring at a time when most of the region's ruling groups were building up a tradition of avowedly Hindu dynastic authority. Even so, the Kallars' involvement in the Kat Bava pir cult suggests that they might otherwise have gone the way of the many north Indian warrior and tribal groups who did become professing Muslims in the centuries following the coming of Islam to the subcontinent. Furthermore, once Yusuf Khan had been re-identified as a pir, he too could have provided many Kallars (and their Marava neighbours) with a link to the world of organised Sufism and formal Muslim adherence. So how close did the region's warrior clans come to this point? As a means of answering this question, it is fortunate that one such group has left a clue to their views in the form of an epic verse work, the *Kān Sāhibu Saṇḍai*. This tells the tale of the 'rebel commandant' in terms which show how he was perceived and 'domesticated' in the southern poligar country. A comparable 'domestication' had already taken place in the case of Kat Bava. This pir became a powerful focus for many Kallars, but their acknowledgement of his power did not lead them on to a tradition of transcendent or universalised Islam. For the Kallars the rite of santanakkuttam at the Kat Bava shrine apparently worked to control and dampen this power. By applying cooling sandalwood paste, the pir's barakat was drained of its capacity to become a self-generating force; in this form it might otherwise have drawn his devotees over the borderline into a domain of complete Islamic identification. In the case of Yusuf Khan, there is the possibility of seeing this kind of near but ultimately abortive Islamisation taking place in a much more accessible historical setting, and, using the 'Khan Sahib' poem, it is this which the next section will seek to describe.

### The 'Khan Sahib' *kummi*

The so-called 'popular' religion of south Asia with its saint cults, hero traditions and power-god shrines is often thought of as being ephemeral and ahistorical because of its supposed lack of scriptural codification. In fact, though, very few of the region's so-called 'folk' cults are the preserve of non-literate devotees only, and the Khan Sahib tradition is one of many cults which have generated a rich array of devotional verse works. In particular the 'rebel' commandant has figured as the subject of one of the most widespread Tamil verse forms, the *kummi* or narrative ballad. These works often take martial hero figures as their subjects: Kattaboma Nayaka, the famous eighteenth century poligar war-leader who was hanged by the British in 1799, figures in at least five surviving Tamil *kummi* works.<sup>39</sup>

Among the *kummi* works dealing with the life and times of Yusuf Khan the most popular is the *Kān Sāhibu Saṇḍai* – 'Khan Sahib's War'. This is a long, action-packed verse narrative which was first published in the early 1900s: the earliest versions of the work probably date from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, though it is clear that there have been additions and modifications in more recent times.<sup>40</sup> For its subject matter the work concentrates on the military campaigns and political intrigues of the southern poligar country in the period when Yusuf Khan was fighting to found his kingdom. This means that it is a rendering of historical events which arises from a local tradition of Tamil 'folk' narrative. It is told from the point of view of the Hindu Maravas who dominated large areas of the southern Tamil poligar country, and it seems to have been composed by bards from the Marava clan domains. For this reason the work provides a rare opportunity to observe the process of eighteenth-century state formation from the point of view of those who were conquered and ruled by the new powers which became established in the region. It also offers a valuable alternative to the dynastic chronicles and European records of eighteenth-century warfare and political

<sup>39</sup> On Tamil *kummi*, see A.N. Perumal, ed., *Kummi-p-padalkal* (Madras, 1982), pp. 53–63. Kattaboma Nayaka is a kind of Tirunelveli Robin Hood: the district's largest local bus firm is named 'Kattaboma Transport' in his honour, and his exploits have been depicted in rousing Tamil cinema epics. Like Khan, he is a martial hero whose place of execution has become a powerful local shrine. Sheep were regularly sacrificed at the site; Kattaboma has been visualised as a warrior huntsman who stalks the surrounding countryside at night, and he too is a bringer and healer of disease. (Interviews Kayattar, July 1977; Pate, *Tinnevelly*, pp. 383–4.)

<sup>40</sup> An edition of the *Kān Sāhibu Saṇḍai* (edited by N. Vanamamalai) was published in Madurai in 1972; it was compiled from several versions of the poem including a mutilated MS dating from about 1900, and several printed copies produced between about 1910 and 1915.

conflict. In particular the text provides a chance to see how the martial plains-dwellers of the poligar country came to interpret the process of Muslim state-formation as it was brought to bear upon their home regions, and how their traditions of faith and worship were reshaped in the light of these political and military developments.<sup>41</sup>

Much of the *Kan Sahibu Sandai* is taken up with long, lurid accounts of slaughter on the battlefield. Yusuf Khan figures prominently in these scenes, and his skills as a fighter and horseman are vividly conveyed:

Thus with the bugles sounding [Khan Sahib] marched through Arcot, then Vellore, then Nellore, then they reached the Parangimalai fort. . . they loaded the black powder and they fired the cannons. The sound resembled the noise of thunder and the cannon fire was like fireballs. . . the shots poured like rain. And the stones were crushed into pieces by the cannon shots and when there were no more cannon balls Kan Sahib filled the muzzles of the cannon with stones and fired these. . . He took a cane and flogged the sepoys as they stormed the walls. Molten lead poured down on them from the fort. . . Khan Sahib won a great victory on that day.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout all this heroic bloodletting the Muslim 'rebel commandant' is identified with vedic divinities and also with the regional gods and deified heroes of the Hindu pantheon. Thus in one characteristic scene 'Khan Sahib' is shown revelling in the display of baled-up heads which he has severed in battle. The image of Arjuna, divine warrior of the *Mahabharata*, is invoked: 'as Arjuna is to the bow so is Khan Sahib to the sword'.<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere he is Kalan (Yama), the fearful black god-king whose realm is the kingdom of the dead: as Yama, Yusuf Khan is a figure of overwhelming power and ascendancy, a bringer of destruction to all who oppose him.<sup>44</sup>

Of all the references to Hindu divinities which occur in the text, the most numerous are those which associate Yusuf Khan with the Tamil goddess tradition. One of the main concerns of the work is to present the 'rebel commandant' as a devotee of the divine Minaksi, reigning goddess of the Sri Minaksi Sundaresvarar temple at Madurai. Khan's rise to power is portrayed as a direct product of the goddess's protection and favour. In the scene which recounts the hero's execution Khan declares that his superhuman strength and powers have been the gift of Minaksi: the

<sup>41</sup> There are modern interpolations such as references to railway trains, but it can be assumed that the work is not a recent product: Khan is not made out to be a 'pro-nationalist' hero, for example.

<sup>42</sup> *Kan Sahibu Sandai* (Vanamamalai edn 1972: hereafter KSS), pp. 21–3.

<sup>43</sup> KSS, p. 26.

<sup>44</sup> KSS, p. 17.

goddess had made his body impervious to wounds except for one vulnerable spot at the top of his skull.

This relationship to the goddess is expressed most fully in the dramatic set-piece which describes Yusuf Khan's triumphant entry into the palace of the former nayaka rulers of Madurai. As conqueror and claimant to their throne, 'Khan Sahib' performs *puja* (worship) at the feet of the goddess and her divine consort. Minaksi then recognises Yusuf Khan as true heir to the throne of Madurai by guiding him to the nayakas' secret gold hoard. As war-leader turned sovereign, Khan has now achieved the critical transformation for which so many of his contemporaries were striving: 'I came to Madurai as *kamathan* [commander]', he declares, 'but I have now finished as a king [*rasa*]'.<sup>45</sup>

Through its references to the Tamil goddess tradition the ballad invests Khan the Muslim hero with the attributes of divinely-sanctioned Hindu kingship. This goes beyond purely abstract notions of royal authority. The bard's intention is to identify Khan Sahib as heir and successor to the Hindu nayaka rulers of Madurai. Khan's domain is portrayed as a recreation of the former nayaka dominion, and much emphasis is placed on the 'rebel commandant's' command of the two key institutions which symbolise nayaka kingship in Madurai. The first of these is the great Madurai Minaksi temple. Although much of this shrine actually predates the nayaka period, the Minaksi Sundaesverarkovil was still widely thought of as a nayaka creation: the temple's most famous structures – especially the celebrated *pudu* or new *mantapam* of Tirumalai Nayaka (1623–59) – were all built by the nayakas.

In acting to support and embellish the Minaksi temple the nayakas are seen as having fulfilled one of the central functions of Tamil kingship. One hundred years later, the great success of Khan's regime was that he too was accepted as a kingly benefactor of the Minaksi temple. As was noted earlier, the Madurai records explicitly identify him as a patron of the temple. These real-life acts of patronage were then taken up and affirmed in the 'Khan Sahib' ballad: the text asserts that as a donor-patron (*yajamana*) at the shrine of the nayakas' patroness, Yusuf Khan is to be accepted as legitimate lord and sovereign within the goddess's domain. In this view Minaksi's realm was founded as the kingdom of the nayakas, and Khan the conqueror then became the newest of those in whom the goddess came to vest her sovereign power.<sup>46</sup>

The great palace of Tirumalai Nayaka was the other key nayaka foundation which appears in the ballad as a major institution of Khan's

<sup>45</sup> KSS, p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> KSS, pp. 25–6.

new domain. In the poem Khan Sahib's occupation of the nayaka seat is depicted as a royal investiture which occurs at the express command of the goddess. This too identifies Khan as an inheritor of nayaka sovereignty. Nayaka rule was originally established through the conquest and fortification of the region's key strategic localities – Jingi in the north, Palaiyamkottai and Srivilliputtur in the far south, and above all Madurai and Trichy, where the building of the great nayaka fortress-palace complexes set the seal on these new sixteenth- and seventeenth-century warrior dominions. It was by reconstituting these towns as military and sacred centres that the nayakas established a legitimate dynastic tradition in Tamilnad, and in the ballad Yusuf Khan's political tactics are seen in much the same terms.<sup>47</sup>

Although the ballad makes Khan a guardian of the Madurai temple and a protégé of its goddess, it also seeks to link him with one of Madurai's most potent pre-colonial pir cult legends. This is the tradition which identified Madurai as the domain of Sikandar the warrior pir, in the same way that Trichy is the domain or vilayat of the fierce demon-slaying Nathar Wali. This tradition too has been incorporated into the *Kan Sahib Sandai*. The poem describes Khan as 'Sikkindhar Sayubu Padaivīran' – 'soldier of Sikandar Sahib'.<sup>48</sup> Once again the ballad has incorporated features of the real historical past. Yusuf Khan really did establish himself as a patron and benefactor of the Madurai Sikandar dargah at the Tirupparankunram hilltop site. The result of this was that yet another of the conventions of south Asian Sufism was made a reality, and the text records this transition. Through Khan's conquests and benefactions, Sikandar actually did become one of the pre-Islamic hero figures whose shrine marks the place in which a Muslim sovereign (or aspiring dynast) would ultimately come to power.

But again the ballad conveys no sense of confrontation along rigidly communal lines even though like the real-life Khan, the warrior pir is a figure of menace and awesome armed might. Here too the Muslim cult saint is seen to personify universal power and dominion. The Madurai Sikandar attracts Hindu and Muslim devotees (or persons who come to acquire formal Hindu and Muslim affiliation). As the bard suggests, Khan comes to rule in the domain which has been claimed and marked out for him by his Sufi predecessor, but his war of conquest is not a jihad, an

<sup>47</sup> Khan's conquests followed the path of nayaka expansion. In his campaigns against the poligars he occupied many of the nayakas' old fort centres. After refortifying the old nayaka citadel of Palaiyamkottai in 1758, he took the seat of the Madurai nayaka lineage as his court centre. Thus under his rule the city was again briefly constituted as the capital of a warrior ruler's domain. Orme MSS OV Pt 1, vol. 50, p. 114, IOL.

<sup>48</sup> KSS, p. 17.

indiscriminate assault on Hindus. Instead, while the ballad never loses sight of Khan's Muslim identity, it is clear that he is also to be identified with the Tamil warrior personalities who played such an important role in the religious culture of the poligar country. The warrior horseman is one of the best known of all nayaka dynastic symbols, and mounted warriors feature prominently in the iconography of south Indian temples from the nayaka period. Some of these images relate to real heroes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and of these, the figure of the celebrated nayaka general Ariyanatha Mudaliyar is particularly relevant here. As a military commander in the service of Visvanatha Nayaka this Hindu *sat-sudra* warrior engineered the main thrust of nayaka military expansion into the southern Tamil country. There is a massive stone carving of him in the *pudumantapam* of the Sri Minaksi temple, and like Yusuf Khan, Ariyanatha Mudaliyar has become a figure of cult veneration across much of the former poligar country.

There are striking parallels between these two martial hero figures. It was Ariyanatha Mudaliyar who imposed nayaka overlordship on the martial chiefdoms of southern Tamilnad. He is therefore remembered in the region as the creator of the poligar system through which the region's Marava and Kallar clan chiefs received new honours and status as poligar 'little kings' under the nayakas. It is not surprising then that this real-life warrior acquired cult status amongst the Hindu martial groups whom he had conquered. During the colonial period Marava and Kallar clan chiefs continued to refer back to the nayakas as the source from which they derived their authority.<sup>49</sup> This explains why Ariyanatha Mudaliyar became such an important cult figure for these groups. He was regarded as the main agent of nayaka state-building in their home domains, and he carried out the strategic alliance-building and incorporation which transformed their clan chiefs into poligars.<sup>50</sup>

As a result Ariyanatha Mudaliyar came to be seen as a special lord and patron amongst many of these Tamil martial groups. In the local cult tradition he is their conqueror and their champion: these are two sides of the same coin since their defeat at his hands created a new and more prestigious identity for the group. This is much like the view of Kat Bava among the Pudukkottai Kallar clans who took this fierce forest pir as their tutelary. Here there was a process of gradual caste formation, with a population of loosely organised warrior people beginning to form around

<sup>49</sup> Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, V, pp. 26, 60, 90–1.

<sup>50</sup> Later nayaka rulers such as Tirumalai Nayaka recruited amongst the Marava and Kallar: in the local cult traditions this is remembered as part of the same process of alliance-building which was initiated by Ariyanatha Mudaliyar. See *ibid.*, p. 23; Sathyanatha Aiyer, *History of the Nayakas of Madura*, pp. 58–62.

an appropriately warlike hero figure. In this case the tutelary in question was a real historical conqueror whose exploits actually did transform the group's status and identity.

Ariyanatha Mudaliyar was not the only pre-colonial military man who became a tutelary patron figure amongst some of the region's cattle-keeping predator groups. As the poligars began to confront the East India Company's forces in the eighteenth century some of their Kallar and Marava clansmen even recruited Englishmen into their pantheons of deified conqueror-champions. In 1817 the traveller Thomas Turnbull described 'a certain Captain Rumley [who] was sent with troops to check the turbulent Collieres [Kallars]'. According to Turnbull, Rumley became a deified hero like Khan or the brandy-swilling British officer of chapter 1. 'He became the terror of the Collierie Naud [the Kallars' 'nad' or home domain], and was highly respected and revered by the designation of Rumley Swamy, under which appellation the Collieres afterwards distinguished him.'<sup>51</sup>

It was Yusuf Khan though who became the best known and most potent of these warrior figures: he was a direct inheritor of Ariyanatha Mudaliyar's cult status, and in some parts of southern Tamilnad the two have become almost interchangeable as figures of power from the pre-colonial past. (For example both were credited equally with such key 'kingly' acts as the building of the Palaiyamkottai fortress and the construction of anicuts on the Tambraparni.)<sup>52</sup> The dual role of conqueror-champion works particularly well as a means of resolving the inherent tension in the notion of a Muslim warrior bestowing honours on his defeated Hindu subjects. As in the case of Ariyanatha Mudaliyar, Khan is seen as having overmastered the Tamil warrior chiefs. Having demonstrated his martial prowess he too incorporates them into his domain; he acts as their champion and benefactor by recruiting them to his army and by elevating their chiefs to the status of 'little kings' within his domain.<sup>53</sup>

In the ballad Khan Sahib is more than a hero who comes from outside the Marava domains to conquer and bring them glory. He actually becomes a Marava: as their lord and cult patron Yusuf Khan is depicted as an embodiment of their own distinctive warrior culture with its

<sup>51</sup> Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, V, p. 59.

<sup>52</sup> Pate, *Tinnevely*, p. 61. The Khan cult may also be linked to the tradition of the deified Kallar warrior known as 'Madurai viran' (the Madurai hero); his devotees describe him as a licentious soldier and one-time lieutenant of the Madurai ruler Tirumalai Nayaka. Francis, *South Arcot*, pp. 101-2.

<sup>53</sup> In the ballad Khan also overmasters several Telugu-speaking 'Vaduga' chiefs: even the famous Kattaboma Nayaka stands trembling before him. KSS, pp. 26-7.

reverence of fierce blood-taking deities – Kali the stalker of graveyards, Karuppan the ‘black brother’, Aiyanar the warrior horseman – and its emphasis on displays of strength and valour. The title Marava itself is thought to derive from *maram* – wrath, anger or murder; the term denotes sin or vice as well as strength (*vali*) and military exploits or bravery (*vīram*).<sup>54</sup> Again Khan’s Muslim identity does not create a difficulty here. The role of conqueror – patron is itself ambivalent, and here the figure of a Muslim – a warrior, a taker of life, a meat-eater – is wholly appropriate as an idealisation of the Marava corporate *dharma*, that is the complex of customs and observances which we now describe as the group’s ‘traditional’ caste lifestyle.

This too was a tradition of caste identity which was still taking shape at the time of Khan’s campaigns against the poligars, but as far as the ballad is concerned, the men of the Marava poligar domains did possess a caste ‘lifestyle’, and this involved the inversion of the Brahmanical conventions regarding ritual purity and caste status. ‘Toddy is the liquor that we drink’ exult the Marava war-leaders in the ballad.<sup>55</sup> This is a boast and a cry of triumph. Alcohol heats the blood and liberates violent and uncontrollable passions. For groups whose caste lifestyle was coming to be based on ideas of hierarchy and purity, toddy is polluting and its consumption must damage the group as a moral community. What is being expressed here, though, is an ideal which can be identified amongst many of the one-time pastoralists and semi-nomadic martial groups of the south. For people like the Marava and the Kallar the liberation of murderous wrath is precisely what is called for if they are to fulfil their dharmic obligations. With their clubs and boomerangs, their *jellikattu* or bull-baiting rituals and their tradition of *kāval* – the predator–protector right under which they levied tribute on settled cultivators – these martial groups possessed an ideology of power and dominance rather than purity. Therefore for them, as the ballad indicates, these same polluting substances are a source of strength and vitality: their consumption was meritorious since it worked to sustain their corporate essence and identity.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> J.P. Fabricius, *Tamil and English Dictionary*, 4th edn (Tranquebar, 1972), p. 782.

<sup>55</sup> KSS, pp. 29–30.

<sup>56</sup> Thurston *Castes and Tribes*, V, pp. 43–5. On the ritual significance of Marava and Kallar weapons see *ibid.*, V, p. 71. Another term derived from the word *maram* is *maṇilaiṭṭiporuḷ*, the levying of forced tribute payments from an enemy. There is also *maṇilaiṭṭipam*, obtaining a bride by performing an act of valour such as subduing a bull. (Fabricius, *Dictionary*, p. 782.) According to the early colonial ethnographers both of these institutions were long-standing features of the Marava and Kallar lifestyles: see Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, V, pp. 28, 66–7, 75.

In the ballad Khan too is a warrior whose strength comes from flesh-eating and alcohol. As he prepares to storm a poligar stronghold he issues arrack (country liquor) to his men. This rouses and strengthens them and they go on to win a great victory.<sup>57</sup> This perception of the lifestyle and customs which are appropriate to men of the martial caste groups is of obvious relevance if one is to explain why a Muslim military man like Khan makes such a convincing Marava, and why he was so readily identifiable as a deified cult hero amongst the south's warrior predator groups. For Khan the same equation of power and impurity was easily made. Like the consumption of beef, the drinking of alcohol is an 'impure' practice which Tamil Hindus often associate with Muslims. The fact that Muslim teaching officially bans alcohol is of little relevance here: throughout the south Muslims and especially Muslim military people were seen as men who drink and consume meat and are therefore beings of fierce and demonic energies.

In the *Kan Sahibu Sandai* virtually all the images chosen to describe Yusuf Khan are those which portray him in just these terms, as a figure of unleashed destructive power. He is a tiger, an enraged bull elephant, and in one passage he is actually described as an asura or demon.<sup>58</sup> Throughout the work Khan Sahib's displays of martial ferocity resemble the eruptions of demonic power ascribed to the Tamil goddess in her active avenging form. Here, though, this depiction of demonic powers is rooted in a highly coloured but still recognisable version of the military campaigns and political conflicts of the middle of the century. Thus Yusuf Khan's successful campaigns against the Kallar poligars in the 1750s are evoked through references describing him as all-conquering 'slayer and destroyer of the Kallar race'. He is at his most demonic in the scenes depicting his unharmonious domestic life. In the ballad Yusuf Khan's wife Masa serves as a mouthpiece for the glorification of the Hindu Marava clans led by the poligar raja of Sivaganga. This poligar subverts the 'lily-eyed Masa' with gifts of jewels and silks; he persuades her to confront her husband and demand that he call off his planned invasion of the poligar's home domain. This leads to an uproarious exchange of threats and insults; Yusuf Khan is shown half-crazed with lust and jealousy – 'enraged like a forest tiger with his eyes blood red and shooting out sparks'.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> KSS, p. 21.

<sup>58</sup> KSS, p. 43. It will be remembered that the ballad also identifies Khan with Yama, lord of the dead. In Tamil the term *maram* is often used to describe this deity and his powers: again the identities of the Marava and the death-dealing Khan are united in the ballad. Fabricius, *Dictionary*, p. 782.

<sup>59</sup> KSS, pp. 41–3.

The climactic execution scene provides even greater scope for a display of Khan's power and ferocity. 'Khan Sahib' has been abused and half-starved; chained, he is hurled at the feet of the nawab before being carried off to the gallows. But as the nawab gloats over him, Khan utters a stream of imprecations and curses which surpass all his previous exhibitions of demonic rage:

You son of a washerwoman, you dry-fish selling Labbai, you base fellow, you sinner! If it had been the other way and I had caught you I would devour your raw flesh with coconut, you dry-fish Labbai!<sup>60</sup>

The nawab thus figures in the ballad as the antithesis of the 'rebel commandant'. He is weak and impotent, a sham ruler whose assertion of authority over the poligar country is portrayed as ignoble and improper. In the gruesome imagery of the ballad, the nawab is a piece of raw meat for the lion-hearted Khan to feast upon. Khan is thus to be equated with the fierce demon-slaying deities of the poligar country: these are the gods who annihilate the demonic enemy in just the way that Khan swears to slaughter and consume the nawab.<sup>61</sup>

These divinities nourish themselves on toddy, blood and animal flesh and receive these substances as libations from their devotees – their devotees in this case being the Marava whom Khan has come to represent. The ballad therefore shows Khan as fulfilling the ideal of righteous cosmic warfare which is one of the key motifs of south Indian worship. For this reason then his is the true sovereignty, not the nawab's. Muhammad Ali is raw meat, it is he who is slaughtered and eaten, his domains have been ingested and consumed by Khan Sahib. Khan has also inherited the legitimate domain of the nayakas. Thus when Khan dies the ballad does not see him as having been defeated. Instead it is at this point that he comes into his own as a divine lord and sovereign who rules the Marava domains as their patron and protector, and as the figure of power who embodies their own martial caste dharma.

<sup>60</sup> KSS, p. 114. The term 'Labbai' with its connotations of dark skin and low-ranking Muslim convert status is clearly meant as a deadly insult.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* The fact that he does not actually do so does not lessen the impact: the nawab is still to be visualised as the demon-victim of the triumphant Khan.

## *The final period of nawabi rule in the Carnatic*

Having looked at Khan 'the rebel commandant' and 'Khan Sahib' the pir and power divinity, this chapter now turns to the Walahjahs' problems of statecraft and dominion-building in the years following the move to Madras. Despite the regime's strategic weaknesses, despite its dependence on the East India Company and the chronic indebtedness which led to the much-debated attack on Tanjore, the Walahjahs and their retainers continued with the recruitment of Sufis and with the building and endowment of mosques, shrines and other pious foundations. All these benefactions were assertions of power. They proclaimed that the nawab was still active, and still capable of endowing his realm with new repositories of barakat. In this sense the Walahjahs could even claim to be enlarging their domain since they were adding to its networks of supernatural vilayats, and it was out of these that the Indian Muslim ruler constructed his 'real' dominion.

At the same time the Walahjahs were still making lavish benefactions to the great established foundations. Much of this largesse was still directed to such long-standing beneficiaries as the Nathar Wali dargah and the Vellore Hazarat Makan, but from the last quarter of the eighteenth-century the Walahjahs began to strike out in new directions, seeking particularly to forge links with the dargah of Shahul Hamid of Nagore. This was partly a reflection of the shrine's exceptional power and sanctity for south Indian worshippers: according to one widely known formula, seven journeys of pilgrimage to Nagore confer the same merit as a single haj or pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>1</sup> This concern to broaden the nawabi's sacred landscape is still visible in the Nagore pilgrimage chronicle the *Bahar-i-Azam Jahi* which was commissioned by Muhammad Ali's successor Azam Jah. The cults of martyred eighteenth-century heroes or ghazi-shahid saints figure very prominently in this account, and their

<sup>1</sup> Interviews, Nagore, Feb. 1980. And see M. Abdul Rahim, 'History of Negapatam and its surroundings from the sixteenth century', M. Litt. dissertation, University of Madras, 1971, pp. 146-54. Equations of this kind are made by Hindus as well as Muslims: a pilgrim who goes nine times to Tenkasi, the 'southern Benares', may hope to acquire the same merit as would be gained from a pilgrimage to the northern Kasi.

grave sites are included as important stopping points for the nawab on his sacred progress to the Shahul Hamid shrine. Of these ghazi figures the most notable is Saiyid Muhammad Shahid of Kurkuti, a warrior whose martyrdom and dismemberment – key motifs in south Indian warrior culture – identify him as a dominion builder and a bearer of sovereign power on behalf of his master the nawab.

The chronicle says that Saiyid Muhammad died between Trichy and Nagore while fighting under Muhammad Ali in one of the first campaigns of his reign.

...he... fought against the French, and fell as martyr... the headless body emitting blood continued to ride on the horse back [*sic*] and when it reached this gunbad [the tomb shrine of another pir at Kurkuti, near Kutur] the khuddams [servants] there buried it. For, he had announced... just before he left the place to fight against the French, that he would be slain... but he would be buried in the neighbourhood of the gunbad. His assertion became true. On the third day... his head also reached that place and joined with his body. May Allah have mercy on him!<sup>2</sup>

This martyr's tale recalls the tradition of warrior saints such as Saiyid Fariduddin of Trichy and Saiyid Ibrahim of Eruvadi; from the point of view of the Walajahs, what is presented is a mirror image of the Khan and Chanda Sahib stories. In the case of Saiyid Muhammad, blood is spilled, a head is severed, and the hero is rent apart as a sacrifice to his lord's dominion. His body is then miraculously reconstituted; he is made whole again like the slaughtered Nandi in the tazkiras of the triumphant Penukonda pir, and so the story becomes an affirmation of the Walajahs' indivisible and ever-growing power and suzerainty.

Given this focus on blood-spilling and dominion building, it follows that Muhammad Ali's interest in the Nagore shrine was also bound up with his battles for ascendancy over the many south Indian warrior groups whom he had long sought to reduce to the status of tribute-paying 'feudatories'. The most notable of these were the Maratha rajas of Tanjore, and this was a ruling line with long-standing links to the Nagore shrine. It is not known whether there was an existing Shahul Hamid cult at Nagore when the invading Marathas ousted the nayaka rulers of Tanjore in 1674. The shrine's official tazkira publications describe the saint as a sixteenth-century Sufi adept, but the dargah is now thought to have been a seventeenth-century foundation, and Shahul Hamid may well belong to the category of undatable semi-legendary pirs which includes Nathar Wali and Kat Bava the forest father. What is clear though

<sup>2</sup> *Bahar*, pp. 38–9.

is that with its rich maraikkayar trading clans and its key role as a shipping and export mart, Nagore was a place with which any aspiring south Indian ruler would wish to make contact. It is not surprising then that the Tanjore Marathas are now remembered as the shrine's most munificent benefactors, and there are some traditions which claim that the shrine was actually founded by this line of invading warrior lords.

In reality the site was built up by many different Muslim and non-Muslim benefactors. Two of the shrine's five great flat-sided *minars* (minarets) were built by seventeenth-century maraikkayar ship-owners trading between Malacca and Nagapattinam. Another of these distinctive tower-like structures has been attributed to the nayaka lords who were based in Jingi until 1638, and the dome over the saint's grave site is said to have been built in the 1620s by the sea-going Muslim 'corsairs' of Malabar, the Kunjali Marakkars. The Dutch East India Company is perhaps the most unexpected of the shrine's early benefactors. According to the shrine's own published histories, the Dutch authorities were responsible for building the pir mantapam or pillared hall in which the key rites of the saint's annual kanturi festival still take place.<sup>3</sup>

By the middle of the eighteenth century, though, the Tanjore Marathas had established themselves as the most prominent of the shrine's princely benefactors. The dargah's largest ever recorded donation was an inam of fifteen villages presented by the Tanjore raja Pratab Singh (1739–63); this ruler is also credited with the building of the shrine's last great minar.<sup>4</sup> There is nothing unusual about the forging of links between a notable Muslim shrine and a line of rulers who were striving to build up a tradition of opulent Brahman-centred Hindu kingship. Similar ties were being established in most of the domains which we now think of as straightforward Hindu states. For example, for all their recruitment of gurus and their building of temples, the eighteenth-century Kallar rulers of Pudukkottai took pains to establish themselves as patrons of the domain's major dargahs, particularly the shrine of Kat Bava the 'forest father'. This too was a world which the Walahjabs sought to enter: in the period after Yusuf Khan's Kallar-backed 'rebellion' the nawab became a major benefactor of the Kat Bava shrine.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Rahim, 'History of Negapatam'; Subrahmanyam, 'Trade and the regional economy', p. 310; *Divine Light*, pp. 45–6; *History of Saint Shahul Hameed*, pp. 8–10. The texts treat the tradition of Dutch endowments as another instance of the saint's universal power. By taking European benefactions Shahul Hamid was able to absorb even a Christian colonial power into his network of subject-disciples: both shrine and donor derive enhanced standing from the relationship. Note also the texts' use of the Hindu term 'mantapam'.

<sup>4</sup> K.N. Krishnaswami, *Madras District Gazetteers. Tanjore*, II, (Madras, 1933), p. 253.

<sup>5</sup> Venkatarama Ayyar, *Manual of Pudukkottai State*, II, Pt 1, p. 825.

Here, though, the Walahjabs were merely expanding and confirming their ties of affiliation and patronage within the Tondaiman's domain: the chieftdom had long been a provider of men and supplies for the nawab's campaigns, and in 1795 the nawab even conferred the Mughal title of *mansabdar* on the raja of Pudukkottai, much as Yusuf Khan had conferred jagirs on the Kallar clan chiefs of the Madurai region.<sup>6</sup> Tanjore was a much more difficult nut to crack. The Maratha rajas had resisted every attempt to incorporate them into the nawab's domain, and so Muhammad Ali seized on Nagore as a point of leverage against his unwilling 'feudatory'. His aim was to ensure that he and not the Tanjore Maratha raja would hold power as lord and patron within the vilayat of Shahul Hamid. One of the nawab's first moves in this campaign was to rename yet another of the Tamil country's key urban centres. In this case it was the Maratha rajas' capital, Tanjore, which was to be re-identified in this way: Muhammad Ali proclaimed that this ancient temple town was to be known as Kadarwali in honour of the Nagore pir. (Qadir Wali was one of Shahul Hamid's honorific titles.)<sup>7</sup>

For the Tanjore rajas there were obvious benefits to be derived from the provision of patronage to the Nagore shrine. Like the temple towns with their communities of traders, artisans and other valuable specialists, Nagore was much more than a shrine complex. With its great maraik-kayar trading lineages and its long-standing role in the Indian Ocean piece goods trade, the town was an asset which any south Indian ruler would wish to command. Thus when the Tanjore Marathas established themselves as patrons of the dargah they were making a move which had important political implications. Their benefactions served to associate the regime with the sacred power of the shrine; they also helped to draw the maraikkayar who dominated both town and shrine into the Tanjore rulers' alliance networks. This was just what happened when south Indian rulers made benefactions to temples, and then used these connections to firm up links with powerful local client communities. Here too though, as with the domain-building poligars whose claims of pious patronage were often seen as having been fought out in an arena of conflict and usurpation, these moves constituted a threat and a challenge to the region's other ruling groups, and were therefore closely bound up in the Tamil country's hard-fought eighteenth-century power struggles.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when the conflicts between the European powers, the nawab, the Maratha rajas and the sultans of Mysore all came to focus on the Tanjore domain, the Nagore

<sup>6</sup> Venkatarama Ayyar, *Manual of Pudukkottai*, I, p. 476.

<sup>7</sup> Rahim, 'History of Negapatam', p. 147.

shrine became an important focus for this strategic rivalry. Each of these powers hoped to establish suzerainty over the Nagore dargah, and the renaming of Tanjore was therefore a key move in the nawab's confrontation with his 'rebel' feudatory Tulsaji (1763–87). In 1773, shortly before the nawab launched his notorious British-backed attack on Tanjore, the Maratha ruler ceded Nagore to the Dutch in order to pay off part of his escalating military debt. For Muhammad Ali Walahjah this was a crucial opportunity to establish himself as lord and patron of the shrine. He persuaded the Madras government to finance the purchase of the town and its surrounding territories from the Dutch and to have the whole area transferred to his control, and it was at this point that the nawab began to make large-scale endowments to the shrine. In 1776, in response to the great scandal which had broken out over Muhammad Ali's debts, the Court of Directors ruled that the Tanjore invasion had been launched to serve the interests of the nawab's British creditors; this was denounced as an act of bare-faced public corruption on the part of the Madras Council, and the Tanjore raja was restored to his dominions.<sup>8</sup> For a time Nagore returned to the raja's authority: it was ceded to the Madras authorities in 1778, seized by Haidar Ali in 1780–1, ceded back to the Dutch in the same year and then retaken by the English. Throughout all these vicissitudes the Tanjore raja, his would-be overlords the Walahjahs, and, briefly, the Mysore invaders, all fought to assert rights of patronage over the shrine and its precincts. Even as late as 1784, when it might be thought that the Tanjore raja had lost all formal interests in Nagore and its dargah, the Maratha ruler was still campaigning against what he saw as encroachments by a rival power at Nagore. In this case the point at issue was a set of navigational signals which the British commander at Nagore had taken to hoisting on one of the shrine's minars, possibly on the same minar which the Tanjore rulers had constructed twenty years earlier. These seemingly harmless signal flags could be taken as a sign of sovereignty on the part of the Company and its clients the Walahjahs, and the raja sent off a great stream of petitions to the Madras authorities to have the practice stopped.<sup>9</sup>

By recognising the political importance of shrines such as Nagore, it is possible to see how Hindu and Muslim concepts of power and sanctity came to fuse and interpenetrate in the Tamil country. The Nagore dargah possessed an indisputably Muslim identity: it belonged to the established tradition of Sufi cult shrines; it received (and still receives) strong support

<sup>8</sup> The invasion added to the nawab's debts: Muhammad Ali pledged thirty-five lakhs of rupees (3.5 million) to pay for the Company's troops. Rajayyan, *Tamil Nadu*, p. 148.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175; Rahim, 'History of Negapatam', p. 153.

from the élite maraikkayar Muslims of Tamilnad as well as Muslim trading people operating in southeast Asia and the Malabar coast. At the same time the dargah was an important touchstone in the competitive acts of state-building pursued by professing Hindu and Muslim rulers; it is also a shrine in which the tazkira literature and devotional texts, and also acts of worship and veneration performed at the site, have long been marked by a rich intermingling of ideas drawn from Hindu and Muslim sources (or from sources which we now identify as belonging to the two separate religious and communal traditions). This is a notable feature of works produced by the Tamil-speaking Muslim poets of the south, such as Abdul Qadir Nayinar Labbai, author of the *Nakaiyantati*.

At the same time, however, pir cults or tai'fas such as the cult of Shahul Hamid of Nagore were far from being exclusively Tamil devotional traditions. Many of the Walahjahs' Dakhni- and Urdu-speaking courtiers and military men became devotees of the great 'syncretic' Tamil cult saints, particularly in the later phases of nawabi rule. By the early nineteenth century some of the most distinguished of Muhammad Ali's Urdu- and Dakhni-speaking literati were composing works in praise of the great Tamil pirs. Of these the most notable was a poetic account of the life of the Nagore master Shahul Hamid; it was composed in 1817 by the Walahjah court poet Ghulam Azzuddin Khan Bahadur Mustaqim Jung Nami (1767–1824). This Sufi literary man was one of the Walahjahs' leading court poets. He was awarded the title Malikush Shuara under Muhammad Ali's son and successor Umdatul Umara; he composed many celebrated works of Arabic, Persian and Urdu verse and was himself a member of the Walahjah lineage. (He belonged to one of the Gopamau branches of the family and his two sisters were married to two of Muhammad Ali's sons.)<sup>10</sup>

### The Walahjahs after Muhammad Ali

Muhammad Ali Walahjah I died in 1795 and was succeeded by his son Umdatul Umara (1748–1801). Although the Walahjahs had long maintained close links with influential Shia lineages in the south, the new nawab is thought to have been the first Walahjah ruler who identified himself formally and officially as a Shia.<sup>11</sup> Given the existing pressures on the Walahjah regime this was enough to overstrain the delicate web of alliance and affiliation on which their rule had been based. For the first time since the defeat of the Navaiyats there was a real outbreak of

<sup>10</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 293–6.

<sup>11</sup> See Gurney, 'Fresh light', pp. 237–40.

Sunni-Shia conflict in the Carnatic. These were antagonisms which can be traced back to the ethnic and factional hostilities which had been generated by the Walahjahs' original victory over the Navaiyats and their Deccani Shia client lineages. There is also a comparison here with the social dislocation which can be observed elsewhere in India in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In domains such as Travancore for example, the disruption and eventual collapse of the pre-colonial regimes threw their finely balanced systems of alliance and incorporation into disarray. The result was a hardening of communal and caste-based divisions in regions where corporate and sectarian boundaries had been particularly fluid. This would seem to apply to the emergence of Sunni-Shia factionalism in Madras as well as to the rise of communal tensions on the Malabar coast.<sup>12</sup>

In the Carnatic these Sunni-Shia conflicts produced little actual bloodshed: the most conspicuous of the period's sectarian confrontations took the form of an exchange of scurrilous pamphlets amongst the various pro- and anti-Shia ulama based in Madras.<sup>13</sup> To the British, though, this antagonism took on a more sinister colouring when Muhammad Ali and Umdatul Umara were implicated in a 'treasonable correspondence' with the most threatening of the Company's military rivals, Tipu Sultan of Mysore. It was at this point in the context of the still-festering debate over the Arcot debts that the Madras government moved to overturn the line of succession within the nawabi. The claims of Umdatul Umara's eldest son Tajul Umara were set aside, and the succession fell to the nawab's nephew Azim-ud-daula (1775-1819), who was considered more amenable to British interests in the Carnatic: unlike Tajul Umara, Azim-ud-daula was a Sunni, and British officials argued that this would calm the tensions aroused during the period of Shia rule.

Once Tajul Umara had been deposed it might be thought that the nawabi had been wiped out as a functioning political system. As in Bengal, the Company had become sponsors and military guarantors of the Arcot regime. Here too, the nawab's dependence on his European backers robbed him of prestige and authority. The nawab found himself unable to raise troops and control the operations of his revenue-takers.

<sup>12</sup> See below, chapter 7. Some north Indian courts also affirmed Shia themes at this time: see M.H. Fisher, 'The Imperial Coronation of 1819: Awadh, the British and the Mughals', pp. 246-7, 256-7, in *MAS* 19:2 (1985), pp. 239-77; J.R.I. Cole, 'Imami Shi'ism from Iran to North India', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California-Los Angeles, 1984.

<sup>13</sup> These conflicts took place from 1792 to 1801. See Zakira Ghouse, 'Baqir Agah's contribution to Arabic, Persian and Urdu Literatures', M. Litt. thesis, University of Madras, 1973, pp. 107-9.

Faced with the resulting military insecurity and the probable loss of their interest payments and subsidiary alliance income, the British stepped in as effective king-makers in the Carnatic. The early stages of this process were much like those which led to the collapse of sovereignty in all the other eighteenth-century Mughal successor regimes. By 1777 Muhammad Ali had been forced to disband his cavalry regiment and was borrowing extensively to pay off his troops' arrears of pay. Faced with new military costs during the second Mysore War (1780–4), Muhammad Ali agreed to assign the bulk of his revenues to the Company for a period of five years; ten years later, with the outbreak of the third Mysore war, the Company was appointing its own revenue officers to collect the Carnatic revenues. In 1792 the nawab made over the whole of his Tanjore revenues to the Company; the Maratha kingdom was formally annexed by the Company after the final clash with Mysore in 1799.<sup>14</sup>

Derived of his troops, his revenue apparatus and his best revenue-bearing districts, the nawab might appear by this point to have become a mere figurehead and his domain nothing more than an impotent puppet regime. 'The Nabob . . . is harmless, and entirely in our power', declared one British traveller who visited Madras in 1811. This observer found it amusing that the nawab was still able to demand a royal artillery salute when he paid his state visits to Ft St George. 'It is scarcely necessary to tell you that the Nabob of the Carnatic has neither territory nor political power, the Company having kindly relieved him from both cares; they supply him, however, liberally with money.'<sup>15</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries this traveller missed the point of what he had seen. Under Azim-ud-daula and his successor, Azam Jah (1819–25), Wajahat court life actually achieved new levels of princely splendour. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century the nawabs still supported a great establishment at Chempauk; the ruling line's major life-cycle events – marriages, births and circumcisions – were celebrated with unparalleled magnificence, and largesse still flowed to the region's shrines and holy places. None of this was surprising: once it had ceased to be an expanding territorial domain with its own army and revenue machine, the regime would naturally focus on the sacred and ceremonial functions of kingship and on rituals which exalted the status of the ruler and his kin.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ramaswami, *Political History*, pp. 307–16; Rajayyan, *Tamil Nadu*, pp. 179–181, 197–205.

<sup>15</sup> *A Visit to Madras; Being a Sketch of the Local and Characteristic Peculiarities of that Presidency, in the Year 1811* (London, 1821), pp. 16–17, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Throughout this period the Company devised a variety of schemes to manage the nawab's debts. See Ramaswami, *Political History*, pp. 308–9, 411.

Certainly there were marked changes in this period. The religious benefactions provided by the nawabs Azim-ud-daula and Azam Jah tended towards spectacular individual acts of piety rather than a continuous and broadly directed flow of patronage like that of Muhammad Ali Walahjah. Furthermore in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the most dramatic of the Walahjahs' pious acts were those aimed at securing the nawabi's standing as an Islamic regime with close links to the great central holy places of the Muslim world. Thus in the works of the line's court chroniclers, one of the key acts of the reign of Azam Jah was the construction and despatch of a costly staircase in gilded wood which was shipped off to Mecca for use in the sanctuary of the Kaaba.<sup>17</sup>

So does this mean that the Walahjah regime was engaged in an attempt to 'Islamise' their rule in this period? It cannot be denied that the nawabs were reaching out to the so-called Islamic heartland in the early nineteenth-century. This may have reflected a degree of influence from the days of the court's 'reasonable correspondence' with Tipu Sultan. It is certainly true that in the later stages of his rule the 'tiger of Mysore' came increasingly to emphasise claims of aggressively heightened Islamic identity for his self-proclaimed 'sultanate'. He too reached out for contacts with the Muslim courts and holy places of west Asia and took particular pride in the Ottoman *sanads* (imperial decrees) which affirmed his standing as a legitimate Muslim potentate. It is also true that after Tipu's death, soldiers from the key strongholds and shrine centres of the Walahjah domain were drawn into that dramatic but short-lived 'Islamic' warrior's insurgency, the Vellore Mutiny of 1806.<sup>18</sup>

These later nawabs also continued to place great emphasis on the standing of the court as a centre of art and learning. The scholars and literary men who were based at Chempauk in this period had a key role to play in demonstrating that the nawabi was still active, still carrying out the functions of sovereignty. As long as the nawabs continued to recruit new artists and scholars, it could be claimed that the state was alive and functioning; the style and focus of their works served to reinforce this image of strength and vitality. Many of the compositions produced by these literati highlighted the regime's success in establishing connections with the wider Islamic world. Azam Jah's gift of the Kaaba staircase was a favourite subject for eulogistic verse of this sort: the poet Ghulam Ali

<sup>17</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 236–41, 278.

<sup>18</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Letters of Tipoo*, pp. 304–5. See below, pp. 226–7.

Muza Raza Khan Rayaq (1766–1832) composed the best known of the many Persian poems in praise of this act.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Walahjah court in its final stages**

Although the Arcot court continued to function as a focus of Islamic political and cultural identity during the nineteenth-century, after 1800 the British began to take action in a way which undermined two of the important sets of bonds which had been built up under the rule of the earlier nawabs. The first of these connections were those which bound the south Indian state and the tradition of warrior-based religion.

Since the 1770s the British had sought to reduce the military strength of the nawabi, and to replace its troops with soldiers who were more directly under the East India Company's control. One reason for this was the supposed corruption and inefficiency of the nawab's fort commanders and other high ranking military men. During the wars with Mysore these officials had often failed to produce the supplies and cash payments which were supposed to be handed over to the East India Company's armies under the provisions of the nawab's subsidiary alliance treaties. Many of these officials may have been planning to hoard the missing resources and undertake Khan-style campaigns of 'fitna'. There were others, though, who were probably carrying out the nawab's orders. By this time Muhammad Ali was being forced to reserve most of his remaining income for payments to his private British creditors; even his tribute payments had to take second place to this necessity.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time there were considerable doubts about the 'loyalty' of the Arcot forces. Throughout the eighteenth century most of the north Indian and Deccani soldiers who sought service in south India tended to gravitate towards Muslim rulers who were thought of as being independent of the European powers. Some of these warrior groups dismissed the Walahjahs as Company 'puppets' and shunned their patronage, and many who had taken service under the Walahjahs nursed long-standing grievances against them. The hostility between the nawabs and their Pathan soldiery was particularly marked: some sources trace this to a massacre of Pathans which is supposed to have occurred at Arcot or Vellore in 1744–5.<sup>21</sup> Some nawabi troops mutinied or deserted with their

<sup>19</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 272–80. This poet also served as court physician at Chepauk: scholar-hakims of this type were powerful figures at many Asian Muslim courts.

<sup>20</sup> Compare Barnett's description of Awadh after 1765 in *North India Between Empires*, pp. 67–191.

<sup>21</sup> NMDLT, [Maistre de la Tour] *History of Ayder Ali Khan Nabob-Behader* (London, 1784), pp. 11–14.

commanders to the Mysore forces. The destruction of the Mysore sultanate and the death of Tipu Sultan at Seringapatam in 1799 did not bring this situation to an end. Instead it released across south India a large number of disaffected Muslim troops, together with the Muslim holy men who had traditionally played a large part in the religious life of the subcontinent's soldiery.

This was the background to the growth of the many south Indian pir cults which focused on the persons of Tipu and his family and on those of his military followers who had died violent deaths in campaigns against the Wajahjahs and their British backers.<sup>22</sup> In 1806 the mutiny staged by East India Company troops in the key garrison and shrine town of Vellore temporarily shook British power in the south; its suppression required reinforcements from north India and newly conquered Ceylon. As in the north Indian revolt of 1857, the grievances of soldiers involved in the Vellore rising centred on fears that the British were plotting to carry out forced conversions to Christianity. These fears were associated with the introduction of new European-style uniforms and with the obligatory cutting of soldiers' beards. Economic dislocation and hostility among non-Muslim soldiers to the defeat of Kattabomma Nayaka and his fellow 'rebel' poligars also helped to spread disaffection.<sup>23</sup>

The British were convinced that the revolt was fomented by the wandering Muslim 'faqirs' who were known to have close ties to the region's military men. These non-tariqa Sufis were said to have heightened the soldiers' grievances and to have spread millenarian expectations about the collapse of the East India Company and its forces. In fact there do seem to have been links between the itinerant ascetics and the warrior-based pir cults and millenarian rites which were developing in many parts of Mysore and the Arcot domains. Holy men who were described as 'not orthodox followers of Islam' acted as emissaries between Indian rulers at this time. In 1805 and 1806 some of them were said to have proceeded to Vellore from Tipu's old capital of Mysore: along the route they staged provocative puppet shows in which the main theme was the imminent expulsion of the English by the combined might of the French and the subcontinent's Muslim military men. One of the leaders of these faqirs was described as a 'Perzada . . . another associate of the late

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Suharwardy, 'Life and works of past Muslim Sufis', p. 19; Hamilton, *East India Gazetteer*, p. 734.

<sup>23</sup> These fears were focused on the sepoys' newly introduced headgear, and on the fastenings of their tunics which were said to have been designed in the shape of the Cross. P. Chinian, *The Vellore Mutiny - 1806* (Madras, 1982), p. 24.

Tipoo'.<sup>24</sup> Men such as these 'performed ceremonies in honour of those who fell martyrs in the wars against the British'.<sup>25</sup>

Signs of disaffection and millenarian preaching were reported all across the region, from Hyderabad in the north to the old fort-mart towns of the southern poligar country. The keenest reactions were stirred by rumours which linked fears of forced Christian conversion to the familiar motifs of martial conquest, dismemberment and blood sacrifice. Those who shared in these fears portrayed religious conversion as a hostile act of statecraft. In the nizam's capital, 'it was reported that the Europeans were about to make human sacrifice, that a hundred bodies without heads were lying along the banks of the Moosi river; that the Europeans had built a church, that a sacrifice of human heads was required to sanctify the church and that they designed to massacre the natives except those that would erect the sign of the cross on their doors'.<sup>26</sup> In the former nayaka base of Palaiyamkottai, now transformed into a major British garrison, it was said that the 'faqirs' had made the sepoys believe that 'a ghost was roaming about the fort and that it was the spirit of a Moor blown away by the English gun. To convince the sepoys one day they sprinkled blood at the church door, inside the fort. The traces of blood were found leading to the graveyard'.<sup>27</sup>

The British vigorously suppressed the Vellore Mutiny and undertook reforms of the Madras army, reducing the large unorganised fringe of auxiliaries who were mainly drawn from the disbanded armies of the region's indigenous states and kingdoms. Throughout the next generation the Madras authorities were particularly sensitive in dealing with incidents which could be ascribed to upsurges of Muslim religious feeling, especially when these were connected with wandering Muslim holy men. There was disquiet for example over the circulation of amulets engraved with mysterious Muslim exhortations, and in the 1830s there was an official panic over the supposed growth of 'Wahhabism' amongst south Indian rulers and their client groups, particularly urban artisans.<sup>28</sup> In 1839 the British finally occupied the long-lived Pathan kingdom of

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15–23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 21.

<sup>28</sup> S. Tucker, *South Indian Sketches. Containing a Short Account of Missionary Stations Connected with the Church Missionary Society in Southern India* (Madras and London, 1848), II, p. 17. Wahhabism was defined here as the preaching of holy war and 'sedition' by 'fanatical moulvies' (maulvis); it was thought to be strongest in garrison towns such as Vellore, and the former princely capitals of Madras and Hyderabad. Balfour, *Cyclopaedia*, V, p. W131; Stuart, *North Arcot*, I, pp. 113–14; Thurston, *Omens and Superstitions of Southern India*, p. 197.

Kurnool whose longstanding links with radical Naqshbandiya teachers had been regarded with much suspicion.<sup>29</sup>

There had always been hostility amongst some 'orthodox' ulama to the region's mazdhubs and wandering non-tariqa Sufis. This coincided with the dislike of the colonial authorities for covert teaching, especially when it was associated with disbanded soldiers and other wanderers. One of the most influential exponents of this view was the Madras Surgeon General Edward Balfour (1813–89) an orientalist polymath who directed his prolific literary output towards the reform and moral 'regeneration' of the south Indian Muslim élite. Balfour's prejudices are neatly encapsulated in his widely read *Cyclopaedia of India*. He defines 'faqirs' as men who are 'Be-sharra literally, without law, i.e., do not act up to the precepts of Mahomed, but are latitudinarians . . .'<sup>30</sup> He also describes these faqirs or 'darveshes', terms which he uses for all but the most conventional tariqa Sufis, as 'a low, profligate set of men, held in great disesteem by all classes of the community'.<sup>31</sup> During the nineteenth-century, many of the region's 'respectable' Muslims began to identify themselves with these officially sanctioned views, distancing themselves as far as possible from the mazdhub and faqir tradition, and emphasising its supposedly heterodox nature in their writings and pious exhortations.

Along with official acts to undermine the power of the faqirs, and following on from the Madras Government's suppression of the 'se-ditious' Shia faction within the nawab's household, the British also intervened several times in the internal affairs of the Walahjah court. In 1829–30 one of the nawab's retainers, Khan Bahadur Farooq, became the disciple of a fundamentalist preacher from the north. As a result 'the orthodox Ulamas [*sic*] began to condemn him and declared him to be a follower of Abdul Wahab Najdi [the founder of the fundamentalist Arab Wahhabi movement], ex-communicated [*sic*] by the orthodox Muslims. . . As he was opposed to the British rule in India, the British officers of the East India Company also took part in vilifying him and getting him condemned in the eyes of the common people.'<sup>32</sup>

None of these moves actually succeeded in wiping out the region's warrior pir cults. Hundreds of martial cult saints including Sikandar of Madurai, the Eruvadi conquest saint Sultan Ibrahim, Yusuf Khan 'the

<sup>29</sup> *A Gazetteer of Southern India*, pp. 70–7.

<sup>30</sup> Balfour, *Cyclopaedia*, II, p. F-92. Balfour's concern for 'native improvement' and education led to the founding of numerous philanthropic institutions in Madras including the Muhammadan Public Library (which is still located in its original nineteenth-century premises in Chepauk, just off Mount Road).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, p. 382.

rebel commandant', even the redoubtable Tipu Sultan with his massive marble tomb at Seringapatam and his network of family tomb sites at Vellore, were still revered as figures of power amongst large populations of south Indian devotees. Their tomb shrines still flourished; their tazkiras and oral traditions still circulated, and they continue to receive ardent cult veneration right up to the present day. There were even signs that the Walahjahs were still able to identify themselves with the symbols of power which emanated from the nawabi's early Shia connections. The family continued to sponsor the key rites of the Madras Mohurram festival; its panja or mystical hand emblem is still borne in procession to the Triplicane temple tank. This is one of the last displays of 'kingliness' to which the family now clings. In most other respects the British did succeed in separating the symbolism of sacred power and military cult activity from the Tamil country's newly articulated Muslim political tradition.

The second set of ties which the British undermined were those which linked the Walahjahs with their client courtiers and literary men. By the 1820s one of the features which Arcot had in common with the declining Muslim court centres of north India and the Deccan was the emigration of large numbers of established service families to more stable centres of patronage outside the Carnatic. For example the son of Muhammad Ali Walahjah's poet-general Saiyid Muhammad Musawai Waleh (d. 1770) became a supporter of the deposed nawab-presumptive Taju'l Umara. The Company authorities ordered the confiscation of the family's jagir holdings after the deposition, and so the son of this powerful Walahjah retainer took service under the Nizam.<sup>33</sup>

The colonial authorities also began to intrude themselves as patrons of Islamic learning and high culture in south India. These moves robbed the nawabs of their pre-eminence in the support of Muslim literati and the teaching centres to which they belonged. The key step here was the founding of the East India Company's Arabic madrasa (teaching establishment) in 1812. This institution offered well-paid service to a wide range of Muslim scholars and literary men. Some of these were local literati, but in this period the Company also recruited a new type of Muslim learned man. These newcomers were wholly dependent on British patronage, and their careers were built exclusively on service to the Company or an individual British patron. One such 'new man' was Maulvi Turab Ali Nami (1777–1827). This scholar had been trained in Khairabad and Lucknow. He was recruited to teach Persian to the

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263. In 1816 another poet from a leading Arcot service family, Saiyid Muhammad Khairuddin Faiq (1767–1826), joined the move to Hyderabad. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

Company's servants in Calcutta, toured Persia in the company of his English patron, a Company officer named Locket, and was appointed to teach at the Company's madrasa in its first year of operation. His major literary works were commissioned by Locket and the Governor General Lord Moira, and in his poems these British patrons received the eulogistic dedications which would traditionally have been addressed to an Indian Muslim ruler.<sup>34</sup>

In this period there were even members of the nawabs' own court circle who were prepared to praise the British for their munificence. Descendants of some of the Walahjahs' oldest courtier families composed verses praising the new madrasa and extolling the British as exemplars of true princely largesse. This occurred in the case of a descendant of another nawabi general – Muhammad Najib Khan, whose career had provided the subject for a major work by the celebrated Zawqi of Vellore. The general's great-grandson composed verses which eulogised the Company for its recruitment of Muslim learned men to the new madrasa: the twentieth-century Madras literary historian M. Y. Kokan treats this as a shameful collapse of family morale.<sup>35</sup>

Increasingly, the growing weakness of the Walahjah state and the interventions of the British were combining to fragment the different Muslim political and cultural traditions which had been fusing and invigorating one another under the earlier nawabs of Arcot. This does not mean that the religious element of state power was completely suppressed by these changes. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, those literary men who did remain in service to the Walahjahs continued to proclaim the vitality of nawabi rule: in their writings the state was still being built up, still flourishing as a source of munificence and 'kingly' piety. For all the grandeur of court ceremonial and religious benefactions in this period, the main basis of these claims was the great four-month state pilgrimage which the nawab Azam Jah undertook in 1823: it was this elaborate ceremonial progress from Madras to Nagore and back again by way of Trichy, Arni, Arcot and Vellore which was chronicled in Ghulam Abdul Qadir Nazir's *Bahar-i-Azam Jahi*.

The court chronicler Ghulam was one of the key figures in the nawab's retinue, and it was his task to compose a literary record of the pilgrimage. The aim of the *Bahar* volume was to portray the journey as an affirmation of sovereignty. As such, the pilgrimage was modelled on Muhammad Ali Walahjah's state visits to the shrine; from the earliest period of his rule he

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 299–303.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235. Compare the account of north Indian state ritual in Fisher, 'The imperial coronation'.

marked victories and assertions of suzerainty by undertaking triumphal progresses to Nagore.<sup>36</sup>

According to Ghulam, Azam Jah was attended by a military honour guard, a train of 100 elephants and camels and a might cavalcade of retainers.

...alims [*sic*], shaykhs, members of the royal family, mansabdars, stipendiaries, skilled men of all descriptions, hakims [physicians] and literary men... The equipage of the mahalls along with the ilaqadars [office-holders] of the zenana, the distinguished men, the army of the sarkar, with their dependents, servants, menials, and such others to look after bullocks, vehicles, elephants, mules, horses and camels, kahars [porters], mash'alchi [torch bearers], khallasi, coolies and others, shopkeepers, the English army composed of a battalion of armed men, two hundred troops with their suite and sardars especially Major MacDonald the Government Agent and Colonel Munro who accompanied the Nawwab – all these numbered more than 20,000 men in the aggregate.<sup>37</sup>

The author was undoubtedly inflating everything from the number of camels to the size of the nawab's so-called 'English army', which was probably no more than a small honour guard. But there can be no doubt that the 1823 pilgrimage was an event of crucial importance to the regime. Much of the *Bahar's* value as an historical source lies in its descriptions of the mosques, dargahs and Sufi khanaqahs located along the nawab's route of march. Over 100 of these sites were visited by the nawab and his followers; more than 200 pious foundations were noted as being worthy of inclusion in an inventory of the shrines, tombs and mosques to be found in this part of the nawabi.

At the same time, the *Bahar-i-Azam Jahi* is much more than a simple catalogue of holy places. Wherever it made its halts, the cavalcade was organised into that classic statement of Indo-Islamic dominion, the ceremony known as *darbar* in which the ruler sat in state and transacted with men of honour – with his notables and officials, with his fellow princes and with the lesser lords who made up his domain. In all the pre-colonial Muslim courts of India, darbars were organised around elaborate reciprocal acts of prestation. Arrayed in his jewels and gold-threaded robes the ruler gave out carefully graded tokens of honour, *khelat*, which usually took the form of sumptuous shawls and robes of office. Bernard Cohn has shown that these gifts of garments forged new links of service and affiliation between rulers and subjects. Because they were seen as

<sup>36</sup> *Tuzak*, II, pp. 243–4. Ghulam (1785/6–1827/8) came from a line of long-serving Walajah courtiers and literary men. Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, pp. 241–6, 311–12.

<sup>37</sup> *Bahar*, pp. 5–6.

having come from the body of the ruler, they had the power to incorporate the recipient into that body and thus into the dominion of the reigning lord. For his part the recipient would acknowledge these bonds with a presentation of his own. This took the form of *nazar* or *nadhr*, coins of the ruler's realm; these too were parts of the ruler's substance, and they affirmed that the ruling lord was 'the source of wealth and well-being' for his retainers and subjects.<sup>38</sup>

The *Bahar*'s carefully detailed accounts of these *darbar* rites proclaim that the nawab was still the lord of an active political system. All manner of men are said to have arrayed themselves before him:

tahsildars, ryots, raqqasgan [dancers] and such other ilaqadars [revenue-takers] in that area as were waiting for him hurried eagerly to welcome the Nawwab . . . After he alighted at the tent, they offered him a *nadhr* and trays of fruits. The Nawwab honoured every one with presents suited to his rank.<sup>39</sup>

Each of these exchanges is a display of power, a visible reconstitution of the nawab's alliance and affiliation networks. Hindu poligars from the great south Indian fortress sites are included, and just like the nawab's Muslim courtiers, they too are treated to the minute delineation of colour, grade and pattern which characterises the all-important description of the recipient's *khelat*. At the famous Chanji stronghold, for example, the local lord

submitted *nadhr* to the Nawwab who presented him with a *mahtabi* [light blue] *khilat* embroidered and marked with dots, and a *doshala* [shawl] of the colour of the pomegranate-flower. On the same day Arnachal Wiswanad [Visvanat] Bhandari, the *palayakar* [poligar] of Wetiwalam, who had the honour to interview the Nawwab at the previous *manzil*, received as presents from him a *khilat* which was embroidered and marked with dots, and a *shal* [shawl] of the colour of the pomegranate-flower.<sup>40</sup>

The *Bahar* also takes pains to show that these acts of gift exchange involved British officials of the Company as well as local Hindu and Muslim office-holders. In the narrative the nawab takes an exceedingly lordly attitude to these Company officers: 'Nawwab sahib gave strict orders to Mr Small, the Collector of Chingleput, that he should enjoin the *tahsildar* to attend to whatever demands [were] made for supplies without fail. In this manner orders were given to other Collectors.'<sup>41</sup> In this way it was possible to preserve the vital fiction which reduced the Company to

<sup>38</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing authority in Victorian India', p. 168, in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 165–209.

<sup>39</sup> *Bahar*, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

the status of a feudatory power subject to nawabi overlordship, and which thus conceived of the Company's servants as members of the nawab's service hierarchy.

One of the great moments of the journey is Azam Jah's royal progress into the old nawabi stronghold of Trichy. This is presented as a rite of reconquest. The nawab is seen returning to the first of the key fortress and shrine towns from which the Walahjah domain was built. The locality is portrayed as a power base which had been held in trust for the nawabs by the reigning pirs of Trichy, and in particular by Nathar Wali. As a result the town is identified by its new name as 'Nattharnakar' (Natharnagar) and pointedly described as 'the *dārū'l-amāra* [seat of office] of olden times'. As always in the *Bahar* narrative, the nawab appears as a living icon of kingship, a shining transcendent figure whose gold threaded robe and ornaments 'emitted such bright rays of light that the world illuminating sun felt depressed'.<sup>42</sup> Ghulam continues:

As soon as the *sawari* [conveyance] reached the boundary of the suba [the Trichy fort in this case] a salute of three guns was fired from the fort, and the flag was also hoisted . . . In brief the Nawwab entered the fort . . . in great pomp worthy of his position. The humble author of this book and some other persons who were present at the *majlis* [assembly] submitted *nadhr* [ceremonial offerings] to the Nawwab congratulating him on his coming to the *dārū'l-amāra* of his ancestors after the lapse of three generations, and shedding radiance on this forgotten place.<sup>43</sup>

The nawab's entry into Arcot is described in much the same way. As Ghulam shows, Trichy and Arcot are as important for their pious foundations and holy places as for their early strategic connections with the process of nawabi dominion-building. In the text the major dynastic tombs, mosques, madrasas and pir shrines of Trichy and Arcot are painstakingly enumerated; the nawab makes ceremonial visits to them all. Indeed at each stage along his carefully constructed route the nawab is shown partaking of the *barakat*, the galvanising sacred energy which resides in the shrines and living Sufis of his domain. By making contact with such sites, Azam Jah and his retainers were tracing out and re-occupying the great grid of supernatural pir domains – the *vilayats* – on which the nawab's predecessors had originally built their rule.

Here too, the underlying principle in these acts was the affirmation and

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51. In Muslim devotional texts the power of the pir is often described as a form of brilliant light or lustre, and this kind of imagery is also used to convey the power and majesty of the pious Muslim king. Compare the account of the Balinese ruler as a 'living icon of kingship' in Clifford Geertz, *Negara. The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 98–136.

enhancement of sovereignty. Each stage in the work describes the nawab setting out in a blaze of magnificence to hold court as a reigning lord among the great sovereign Sufis of the south. As he makes his way from shrine to shrine, Azam Jah re-enacts that process of real historical conquest and consolidation which is foreshadowed by the coming of the Sufi. At the same time he is enacting the quest for grace and spiritual illumination which is undertaken by all Muslim pilgrims, and by the Sufi himself as he undergoes his own epic travels. This theme unites the political and devotional aspects of the pilgrimage. Azam Jah is engaged in taking possession of the realm which has been marked out for him and given its political identity by the pirs of the Carnatic, all those real or legendary Sufis who figure so centrally in the *Bahar* narrative. His journey also replicates the travels of the Nagore pir and the many other saints who figure in the text, and his great band of followers corresponds to the disciples who share in the rigours of the Sufi's journey. Like the followers of Nathar Wali, Sultan Ibrahim and the other incoming conqueror pirs of the past, they too were courtiers offering homage and service to their master and overlord.

Furthermore, when the nawab makes his visits to these shrines, what takes place is an exchange of honours as between sovereign lords. This too is achieved through the idiom of the *darbar* and the reciprocal offering of *khelat* and *nazhr*. In one sense the nawab is simply becoming yet another of the pirs' disciple-subjects. It is he who is incorporated into the domains of the various pirs, he who offers *nazhr* (usually gold and silver coins) in token of fealty, and he who receives shawls, turbans (*dastars*) and other marks of honour of the sort which were bestowed by Indo-Islamic rulers upon their newly incorporated subjects. Nonetheless the *Bahar* makes it clear that these are very special exchanges, that what was really happening between the nawab and the pir was an exchange between co-equal sovereign lords. At the climax of the pilgrimage, when the cavalcade makes its nine-day halt at Nagore, *vilayat* of that most potent of all Tamil pirs Shahul Hamid Naguri, the nawab enters the precinct of the pir not simply as a devotee, but as a king at the seat of a fellow sovereign. Azam Jah begins his visits to the *dargah* by dispensing royal prestations – *khelats*, robes of honour and shawls – to the shrine's chief guardians and other notables. He then submits himself as initiate and disciple of the pir by taking *khelat* prestations from the *pirzadas*. Ghulam insists, though, that these are acts which confirm the nawab's sovereign rank: 'The head *mujawar* conferred special distinction on the Nawwab and his brother by tying to their heads a white *dastar* as a sign of respect to royalty.'<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Bahar*, p. 28.

Even more important is the volume's account of Azam Jah's first night at the shrine.

During the night of the 9th [of Jumadal-Akhir, 21st Feb. 1823] the Nawwab carried on his head a silver jar full of sandal wood paste, and walked reverently to the *dargah* with his followers high and low and full paraphernalia. He was present near the holy tomb before dawn when the paste of sandal wood was poured over it. Then he humbly presented a large sum of money as nadhr. He said the *early morning prayer* at the mosque in the compound built by his grand-father and returned to the *dargah*.<sup>45</sup>

Like any other south Indian worshipper, the nawab has made that most important of all acts of Tamil Muslim veneration: he has performed *santanakuttam*, the anointment of the saint's tomb with sacred cooling sandalwood paste. For the event's élite Persian-speaking chronicler there is no conflict, no sense of contradiction between this act of 'syncretic' devotion and the nawab's search for a more broadly 'Islamic' identity for the regime. But while the sandal-paste offering is an act of humble service and penitence, it also works a crucial transformation for the nawab. Once he has made his presentation of sandalwood, Azam Jah becomes a repository of the same galvanising power and energy as the *pir* himself. The volume is quite explicit on this point. The nawab assumes the exalted character of a *pir*; he is mobbed by a crowd of 10,000 devotees, Hindus and Muslims, just like the mixed crowds who pay homage to Muslim cult saints, and the onlookers are said to have 'vied with one another in kissing his feet regarding him as a *murshid-i-kamil*' (an expert *murshid* or spiritual preceptor, the chosen successor of a Sufi master and inheritor of his *barakat*).<sup>46</sup>

Thus even though the nawab has declared his humble fealty to the Nagore *pir*, he has been empowered to receive displays of unqualified fealty from his own subjects and retainers. The exchange of honours with the Nagore *pir* has transferred the saint's transcendent power to his own person: the crowds adore and venerate him as *pir* and lord-preceptor in his own right, an equal sharer of sovereign power and substance with the Nagore *pir*.

### Conclusion

In this account of the development of Islam in the Tamil country, the aim has been to establish what type of Muslim society emerged in the region, and then to ask why Islam did not become fully established as a majority

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27–32.

religion in the south. One reason for the incomplete penetration of Islam in the Carnatic territories is the fragmentation of religious traditions which came about as a consequence of British military and administrative policy. All the same, there are many other Asian and African societies in which Islam continued to expand and take hold, in spite or even because of the experience of European rule: Dutch-ruled Java is the obvious counter-example. The impact of British colonialism is only part of the story; even more importance can be attached to the nature of the indigenous society, and more particularly the development and ultimate 'Hinduisation' of the warrior-ruled little kingdom, and the capacity of martial pastoralists and other potential Muslims to domesticate and contain the power of their pirs and Muslim cult heroes.

Three main points have emerged in these chapters. The first relates to the means by which a Muslim religious tradition first took root in the region. In large areas of the north, an identifiable Muslim community had begun to take shape long before the early eighteenth century. This process of community formation was associated with the growth of international trade, with the expansion of Sufi devotional networks and with the rise of strongly based Muslim dynasties. Starting from an even earlier period, south India too had been influenced by the presence of Sufi scholars and holy men, and by the activities of dynamic Muslim trading people. The difference here was that despite the rise of the so-called Madurai 'sultans' and the claims of spiritual kingship which were made for the region's expansive martial Sufis, the Tamil country lacked a successful early Muslim dynastic tradition like that of mediaeval Bengal, Gujarat or Hindustan. The result was that even as late as 1800, the shift from a broadly based Muslim tradition to an integrated Muslim community was still far from being complete amongst the groups who had come to participate in the region's pir cults and devotional networks.

In the course of the eighteenth century the expansion of Muslim state power in south India did much to unite these disparate strands: there had been much for the aspiring new dynasts to build on, most notably the prestige and lordly lifestyles of the region's trading and military service élites, and the expansive capacities of the south's indigenous saint cults. The second point, though, is that despite the growth of the Arcot state, and despite the availability of pious patronage from the Navaiyats and Walajahs, from their rivals the Mysore sultans and from the many would-be rulers and military men such as Khan and Chanda Sahib, south India never became as fully 'Islamised' as the societies of east Bengal or the Muslim sultanates of Java and the Malay peninsula. Why then was the spread of Islam so much more limited in southeastern India than in these other regions of south and southeast Asia?

It is at this point that we turn to the special nature of the south Indian 'little kingdom'. The rise and expansion of the Khan Sahib cult shows that Islam was capable of providing a focus for people like the Kallars and Maraṅṅas, that is for warrior predators and other groups who were still in the process of becoming formally professing Hindus at the beginning of the colonial period, and might conceivably have become fully 'Islamised' Muslims by the late eighteenth or nineteenth century. The problem, though, was that Islam reached most of these groups in the form of dynamic warrior cult traditions. Figures such as Khan and Kat Bava were readily received as divinely empowered hero tutelaries; their distinctive Muslim identity was usually recognised by their devotees, but such people still tended to place them alongside or even subordinate to the amman goddesses and male power divinities of the pre-existing Tamil pantheon.

In the eighteenth century the rulers of the warrior domains and petty chiefdoms where most of the ex-pastoralists and warriors lived were usually active patrons of dargahs and pir cult networks. But this was also the time when almost all of the Tamil country's 'little kings' were reaching out to embrace and incorporate forms of formal or 'high' Hindu worship as well. It is not that Brahmanical Hinduism offered the only model of kingliness to be found in south India. In the seventeenth-century and even well into the eighteenth-century, petty rulers were able to associate themselves with Muslim dynastic symbols, and Christianity too provided a limited political focus for certain aspiring dynasts, as chapter 10 will show. However, by the time the two nawabi lines appeared with their newly formulated models of Muslim kingship, the expansion of regional commercial networks and the development of pilgrimage and patronage networks around shrine complexes like Tirupati had already determined that Ramnad, Tanjore, Pudukkottai and most of the other south Indian kingdoms were moving towards an accommodation with the great centres of theistic high Hinduism.

The third and final point is that the Tamil country has never been truly 'Hindu' in the sense of possessing a deterministic or primordial adherence to a single, cohesive religious tradition. On the contrary, it was largely a matter of historical timing that the smaller kingdoms of the south, especially those which were located in the remote dry areas of the Tamil country, had already begun to look to the region's great Hindu temples and Brahman gurus at a time when the Muslim state of Arcot was just beginning to reappear as an alternative but ultimately unsuccessful source of dynastic legitimacy.



## *Part II*



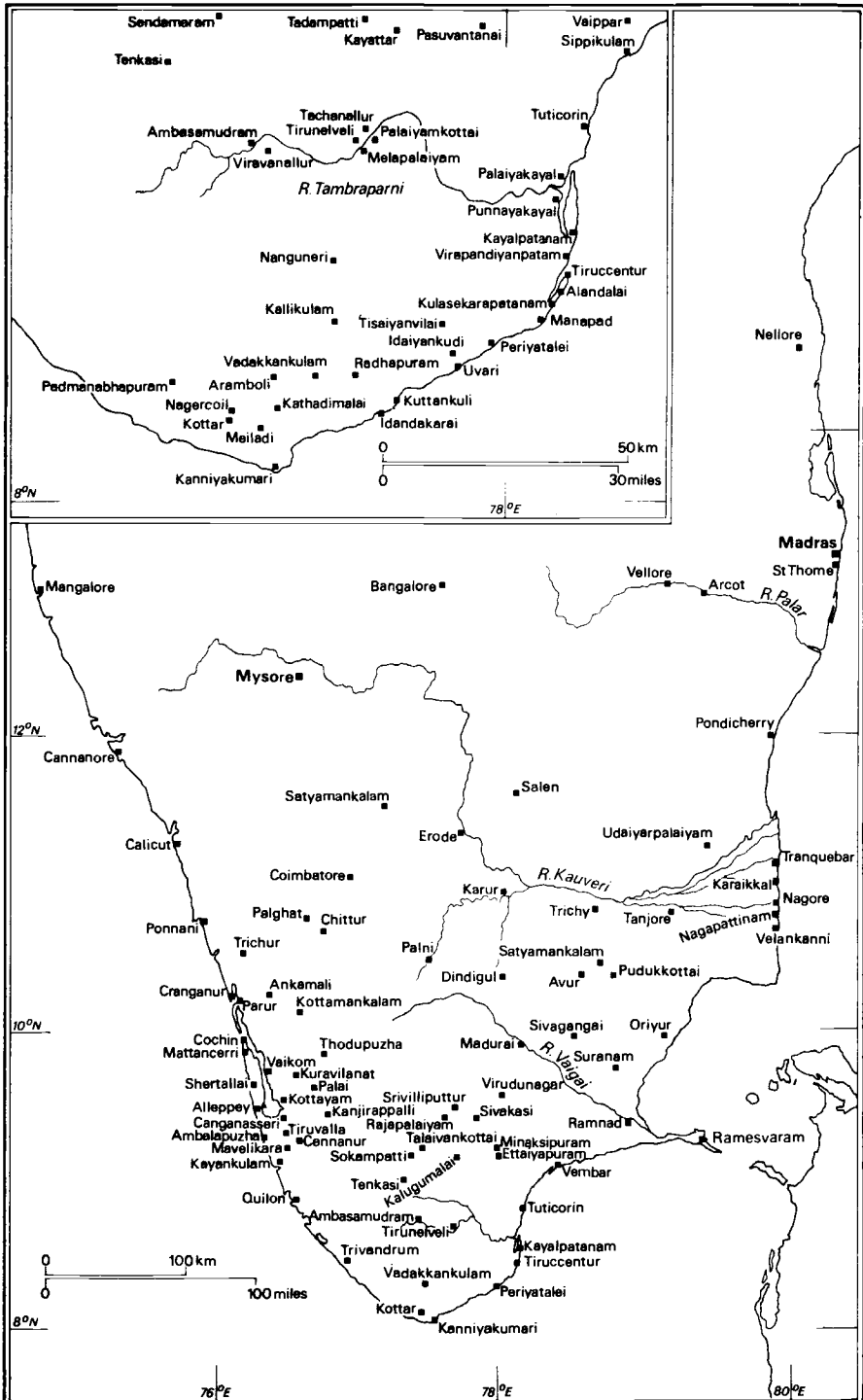
## *South Indian Christians in the pre-colonial period*

### Introduction

The next four chapters will focus on south India's large and varied Christian populations, beginning with the élite Malayalam-speaking St Thomas Christians of the Malabar coast (now the state of Kerala). As for the region's Muslim groups, the questions to be asked here are, first, how did the various Christian populations come to be established in the south; second, what was their relationship to the culture and society which surrounded them, and third, how were they affected by economic change and by shifts in state power in the pre-colonial and colonial periods?

European missionaries have always tended to be tireless diarists and record keepers. The most distinguished of them – early Jesuits such as Robert de Nobili, nineteenth-century scholar-missionaries like Robert Caldwell, G.U. Pope and the Abbé Dubois – were pioneering ethnographers, linguists and regional historians, and their writings are still an important source of first-hand observation and analysis. Since the Roman Catholic church was an essential arm of state power in the *Estado da Índia*, that is in the regions of Asia over which Portugal claimed ecclesiastical and imperial authority in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, there is much Portuguese documentation of south India's early Catholic convert groups. The British sources too take a disproportionate interest in south Indian Christians. Although (with one or two exceptions) missionaries had no official standing under British rule, members of the major Protestant missionary organisations took it upon themselves to document the supposed 'abuses' and 'corruptions' of 'native heathen' society, bombarding government officials and home-based evangelical journals with demands for state intervention on behalf of their converts, and arousing energetic debates about the potential merits and dangers of missionary-sponsored proselytising campaigns.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On de Nobili (1577–1656) see below, pp. 389–94. South India's other scholar-missionaries include the Jesuit grammarian and Tamil literary scholar J.C. Beschi (1680–1747); Bartholomew Ziegenbalg (1683–1719) of the Danish mission at Tranquebar; and J.P. Fabricius (in India 1740–91), author of the first Tamil–English lexicon. *A Political and General History of the District of Tinnevely* by the missionary bishop Robert Caldwell (1814–92) was one of the earliest European attempts to write a detailed



*Map 4. Major Christian religious centres and associated sites.*

All this has meant that in south India, where the great majority of India's Christian 'converts' came to be located, much more has been recorded about missionaries and their adherents than about the region's professing Muslims. But the availability of all these sources has proved something of a mixed blessing. Because there is so much European-language material on Tamil and Keralan Christians, and because of their supposed dependence on European religious leadership and ideology, these groups have been thought of as being less authentically 'Indian' than other south Indians. There has been a similar debate about whether adherence to Islam has debarred south Asian Muslims from acquiring a true sense of Indian nationhood. But like Bengali or Punjabi or Kashmiri Muslims, the Labbais, maraikkayars, Dakhnis and other Muslims of south India were fully and authentically Muslim while still participating in a broadly based regional culture which cut across most formal divisions of sect and community. Once these stereotypes and misperceptions are cleared away, it is possible to deal with south India's Christians in much the same terms. Here too there is a vast array of shrine histories, devotional texts and local legends, and as for the region's Muslim communities, these can be used in combination with European sources to reveal what conversion to Christianity really meant in south India, and how indigenous forms of Christian faith and observance took shape in Malabar and Tamilnad.

The St Thomas or 'Syrian' Christians are a group who defy all the received wisdom about Indian Christians. (The term 'Syrian' refers to the presumed west Asian origins of the group's ancestors and to their use of Syriac as a liturgical language. Their spoken language has been Malayalam for many centuries; the terms Syrian and St Thomas Christian will be used interchangeably here.) Far from having been a low-status, low-caste convert group who owed their origins to European missionaries and the colonial state, the Syrians have a history of power and privilege which dates from many centuries before the coming of European rule. Syrian warriors, traders and church notables were honoured and

Indian regional history. His contemporary G.U. Pope (1820–1908) published the first European editions of the great Tamil devotional texts; the Abbé Dubois's *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (based on experience of Tamilnad and Mysore from 1793–1819) is a classic work of south Indian ethnography. Initially many East India Company officials believed that conversions posed a threat to British rule. In the early nineteenth century it was claimed that the region's Roman Catholic converts were a spawning ground for 'sedition' and French-inspired 'Jacobinism'. Later some officials maintained that crises such as the Vellore Mutiny and the anti-missionary outbreaks of the Hindu *vipūti sangam* (or 'Sacred Ash Society') of the 1840s were caused by the expansion of evangelical Protestant churches in south India. Others sympathised with the aims of the evangelical missionary groups and sought to extend their influence.

rewarded by Malayali Hindu rulers, and the group has long regarded itself as ritually superior to all other Christian convert groups.

This sense of distinct and superior status was bound by with the Syrians' claims of apostolic foundation for their church, and with their involvement in the cult of St Thomas the Apostle, 'Doubting Thomas', who is claimed as the group's patron and founder figure. The myths, texts and songs which recount the legend of St Thomas's exploits are still widely known in the far south. Most Malayalam versions of the tradition claim that the apostle sailed to the Malabar coast in AD 50, and that after a period of heroic evangelising and church-building he travelled east to Mylapore, now a suburb of Madras, where he underwent his bloody and spectacular martyrdom. There are also tales of the saint's many posthumous miracles, both at the site of his martyrdom, and at the many churches and localities associated with his travels in Malabar.<sup>2</sup>

These accounts have much in common with an early west Asian hagiography, the Acts of St Thomas, which described the apostle's exploits in a setting which seems to have been based on the first-century Indo-Parthian kingdom of Taxila.<sup>3</sup> The obvious conclusion is that the St Thomas tradition was brought to south India by the west Asian merchants and navigators who had been frequenting the Keralan spice-marketing localities since Roman times. Over the centuries the tale would simply have been transformed to fit the local sacred landscape. As this chapter will show, Mylapore is an ancient holy place for south Indian Hindus and apparently for Muslims as well, and it is not surprising that it should have come to feature in the hagiography of a great Christian cult figure.

Whatever the literal truth may be, it is known that the legends of St Thomas predate the arrival of the Portuguese in south India, and for centuries the Syrians' foundation accounts have maintained that the group is descended from local men of high standing – usually described as members of the élite Keralan Nambudiri Brahman caste group – who were converted by St Thomas during his stay in Malabar. It is also known that there were Christians (and Jewish trading groups) settled 'in Male where the pepper grows' in the very early centuries of the Christian era. These immigrant Christians were established in the rich spice entrepôts

<sup>2</sup> For a typical foundation account see 'Memorandums [sic] touching the Syrians – as taken from the information given by . . . 2 Syrian priests' Quilon, Dec. 1813, Papers of the Rev. Dr William Hodge Mill, MS Mill 192, fo. 77r, Bodleian Library, Oxford [hereafter MS Mill]. See also L.W. Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas* (Cambridge, 1956), pp. 43–59; L.K. Anantakrishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians* (Ernakulam, 1926), pp. 2–7, 13–16, 175.

<sup>3</sup> The Acts text was apparently composed in the fourteenth-century AD. Brown, *Indian Christians*, pp. 45–7.

of Kerala as early as the sixth-century AD and possibly much earlier; most of the group's main centres of population, localities such as Quilon, Cranganur and Kuravilinat, have a history of trade and commerce dating back over many centuries before the arrival of the first western travellers. Thus, like Tamilnad's maritime Shafi Muslims, the group we know now as Syrian Christians are almost certainly the descendants of west Asian trading and seafaring people and their local converts.<sup>4</sup>

What the Syrians also have in common with their Muslim neighbours is a set of legendary hero-precursors and holy men, travellers from overseas who are revered as bringers of Christian teachings and as founders of the region's early shrines and commercial centres. These figures are comparable to the Muslim 'Sahabi' or companions of the Prophet whose tombs are supposed to be located in Karaikkal, and to all the other early pirs who are associated with the coming of Islam to south India. St Thomas is said to have made his first Indian landfall on the island of Malankara near the ancient trading town of Kodungallur or Cranganur (known to the classical geographers as Muziris, and the site of an ancient Jewish settlement). During his travels in Kerala, the apostle is supposed to have founded at least seven of Malabar's ancient churches. There are dozens of localities which are now claimed as the sites of these original apostolic shrines. The list usually includes the churches of Palayur, Paravur (Parur) Quilon, Niranom, Kotamangalam, and Kokkamangalam, as well as the Cranganur-Malankara site. The great church centres of Kottayam and Kuravilangat have also been claimed as apostolic foundations. It is striking that these centres include Kerala's most important pre-colonial export centres, as well as localities on the estuaries and inland waterways ('backwaters') which served as natural arteries of trade and transport in the region.<sup>5</sup>

In their own legends and in the way in which they have been perceived

<sup>4</sup> The account of the sixth-century traveller Cosmas Indicopleustes is published as *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk*. Trans. J.W. McCrindle (London, 1897). On the Malabar Jews see W.J. Fischel, 'Exploration of the Jewish antiquities of Cochin on the Malabar Coast', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 87 (1967), pp. 230-48; and S.S. Koder, *History of the Jews of Kerala* (Cochin, 1974). Christian merchants from west Asia were buying pepper in the great Kerala entrepôt of Quilon by the ninth century AD, and possibly several hundred years earlier. See also Brown, *Indian Christians*, p. 52. In Malayalam the Syrians were often referred to as *nazrāni* [Nazarene, i.e. Christian] *māppilas*: as for the Malayali Muslims, the term *mappila* is thought to refer to the group's commercial origins. See Dale and Menon, 'Nerccas', p. 523, note 1.

<sup>5</sup> In 1565, when the Portuguese and the Muslim-backed ruler of Calicut were at war, the Cranganur Jews abandoned this ancient settlement and moved to Cochin, a minor southern port-state which owed its rise to the sponsorship of the Portuguese. Only a handful of Jews still live in Cochin. Logan, *Malabar*, I, p. 332.

in the wider society, the Syrians have been linked for centuries with the world of maritime trade and commerce, and with traditions of service and clientage under the region's local rulers. The St Thomas tradition has come to overlap with accounts of other heroic founder figures such as Thomas of Cana, who is sometimes known as Thomas of Jerusalem. This second Thomas is usually described as a pious west Asian Christian merchant who led a seaborne colonising party to the Malabar coast. He too is remembered as the founder of Cranganur – this second date of origin is usually given as AD 345 – and he is said to have been granted privileged trading rights in one of the ancient Keralan kingdoms.<sup>6</sup> Apart from these overlapping Thomas figures the Syrians' most widely revered precursor figures are all real or semi-mythical clerics. Here too the traditions focus on claims of west Asian maritime origins, and on accounts of the founding of great Keralan trading centres in the lands of ancient 'Perumal' ruling lords. The earliest of these figures are a pair of memorably named ninth-century hero-bishops, Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh. Yet another series of early churches are supposed to have been founded by this brace of semi-legendary clerics, and they are also revered as the founders of Kerala's second major entrepot, Quilon.<sup>7</sup>

Shorn of its supernatural features, these tales are consistent with the statements of mediaeval European travellers who reported on the existence of a south Indian St Thomas tradition, and observed the key role played by locally settled Christian groups in the Malabar pepper trade. In Quilon Syrian merchants served thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Keralan rulers as pepper brokers and port revenue officers like the *shahbandars* of Indonesia, and large numbers of St Thomas Christians continued to specialise in maritime and hinterland trade and transport throughout the colonial period. In all these features the Syrians resembled the self-consciously élite Muslim trading groups of south India, and like other Indian trading and maritime groups they developed a strong

<sup>6</sup> The Syrians' two overarching endogamous divisions (the 'northists' and 'southists') identify themselves as descendants of this Thomas's two wives.

<sup>7</sup> The episcopal title 'Mar' (Syriac: 'lord') is used in the Malabar churches and in west Asia. Sapor (Shapur) and Prodh (Firuz) are variants of names used by Sasanian royalty in the fourth and fifth centuries AD. The date usually given for the foundation of Quilon is AD 825. This is also the first year of the Kollam or Quilon era, by which Malayalis have traditionally computed time. Keralan historians have made much of the three ancient Malayalam copper plate deeds which registered grants of royal 'honours' to a Jewish settler colony and two different colonies of Christian settlers. One of the Christian grants is thought to date from about AD 824; the recipient is given as Maruvan Sapir Iso, and this has been taken as a rendering of the two titles Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh. Brown, *Indian Christians*, pp. 74–5, 85–90; Logan *Malabar*, I, pp. 265–71; H. Gundert, 'Translation and analysis of the ancient documents engraved on copper. . .', *MjLS*, 13:1 (1844), pp. 115–46; K.K. Nair, 'Memorandum on the Syrian and Jewish' copper plates of Malabar', *MjLS* (n.s.), 5:9 (1859), pp. 30–55.

tradition of occupational and geographical mobility. The closest parallel here is probably to the Dakhni-speaking Navaiyats, because as early as the fifteenth century large numbers of Syrians had risen to prominence as skilled military men. Their service to the Hindu lords of southern Malabar was rewarded with grants of land and with honours and titles which identified them as members of a high ranking local client community.<sup>8</sup>

They were also becoming a numerically significant group. Unlike the region's small and exclusive coastal settler communities, the Syrians moved rapidly into the inland pepper-growing regions. Having settled in riverine and backwater trading centres such as Kottayam, Palai, Tiruvella and Ankamali, they probably intermarried with the region's powerful Nayar landholders. Through such marriages and the power of the Syrians' expanding cult networks it seems that these Nayars came to identify themselves as St Thomas Christians. In 1503 a west Asian prelate reported that there were 30,000 St Thomas Christian families in the Malabar country, and in 1653 the group was said to number 200,000. As of the mid- to late nineteenth century the St Thomas Christians probably comprised about 10 to 12 per cent of the Malayali population. In the areas of southern Malabar, Cochin and north Travancore, where they were most numerous, Syrians comprised up to 50 per cent of the total population in several talukas (administrative districts).<sup>9</sup>

### The Syrians' warrior heritage

Until the 1740s the Keralan region contained a shifting array of some twenty or thirty contending chiefdoms and principalities. The Hindu

<sup>8</sup> By the early sixteenth-century many Syrians owned large tracts of pepper-growing land near Quilon and in the hinterland area around Kayankulam. See H. Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither* (4 vols., London, 1914–25), III, p. 217; Dames, ed., *Duarte Barbosa*, II, pp. 96–7. Large numbers of Syrians also continued to trade in the port towns: on the Christian traders, ship owners and pepper brokers of Cochin, Kayankulam and Cranganur see *ibid.*, II, pp. 88–9, 93, 96–7; Antonio Gouvea, *Histoire Orientale des grans progres de l'eglise catholique*, Trans. J.B. de Glen (Anvers, 1609: first pub. 1606), p. 312–13.

<sup>9</sup> Yule, *Cathay*, I, pp. 101–15; G.T. Mackenzie 'History of Christianity in Travancore', in V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual* (3 vols., Trivandrum, 1906), II, pp. 148–9; D. Ferrol *The Jesuits in Malabar* (Bangalore, 1939), p. 176. According to the 1901 Census of India there were nearly half a million St Thomas Christians in the Malayalam-speaking region of the south. The Census reports of 1871–6 contain the most useful regional breakdowns – 295,770 Syrians in Travancore; 140,265 in Cochin; 13,763 in the British Indian district of Malabar. These rough early Census figures convey some sense of the group's size and distribution across the region. The small Jewish settler population also played a key role in some of the pre-colonial kingdoms, but they were never absorbed into the wider landholding and martial élite. See L.K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, *The Cochin Tribes and Castes* (2 vols., Madras, 1909–12), II, pp. 400–34.

lineages who ruled these states derived most of their income from taxing the trade in pepper and other forest products (ivory, spices and hardwoods) which had brought the Malabar coast into the Indian Ocean trading system from well before the first century AD. Like the 'port kings' of maritime Indonesia, most of these Malayali rulers exercised authority over little more than a coastal or river estuary entrepôt and its immediate hinterland. Three or four rulers with access to the best harbours or the richest spice zones – the zamorins of Calicut, the rajas of Cochin, Vatakkumkur, Tekkumkur and Venad – had extended their commercial networks and built up a tradition of royal status and authority. These claims to kingship involved little more than a vague claim of suzerainty over lesser local lords. Outright conquest was rare: rulers sought to assert a measure of authority by building temples or endowing existing shrines within a neighbouring domain, and these extensions of ritual authority usually did not lead to the seizure of commercial or agricultural resources.<sup>10</sup>

Despite, or perhaps because of, the looseness of these spheres of dominance, the mediaeval chiefdoms of Malabar were highly militarised societies with large warrior populations and a distinctive martial culture. Here too caste categories were fluid, with much outside recruitment into the ranks of the rulers' client warrior groups. At the same time, status demarcation was more highly developed in the pre-colonial Keralan kingdoms than it was elsewhere in the south, particularly within the comparatively open and unstratified social order of the poligar domains. From the sixteenth century onward European observers expressed astonishment at the region's elaborately graded code of ritual purity and pollution. Members of untouchable and lower caste groups could pollute their superiors by atmospheric contact as well as by touch, and there was a scale of measurement which decreed how close men of each low-ranking group might approach a Brahman or a member of the upper Nayar élite. There were also rigorous restrictions which preserved the purity of temples and other sacred precincts: here too, all those defined as members of low-ranking groups were banned from proximity to such sites, and even from the procession routes which adjoined them.<sup>11</sup>

It is the Nayars with whom the old Keralan martial lifestyle has usually been associated. This is the best known of the Malayali caste groups: most of the land-holders and ex-warriors who are now identified as Nayars

<sup>10</sup> K.M. Panikkar, *A History of Kerala 1498–1801* (Annamalainagar, 1960), pp. 5–26.

<sup>11</sup> On Keralan 'distance pollution' see Joan P. Mencher, 'Kerala and Madras: a comparative study of ecology and social structure', *Ethnology* 5:2 (1966), pp. 135–71; and Fuller, *The Nayars Today*, pp. 43–6.

came to share a distinctive matrilineal descent system, and anthropologists invariably cite them in comparative works on kinship and family structure. What is more relevant here is the fact that although a wide range of occupational and status groups have claimed Nayar identity, the highest ranking and most powerful of these were Nayar title-holders who established themselves as élite military service groups in the pre-colonial kingdoms. These were the people who have come to be thought of as the bearers of Kerala's 'traditional' warrior lifestyle with its martial goddess cults, and its system of martial preceptorship under which young boys were trained to arms in *kalari* gymnasia under the tuition of master warriors known as *panikkars*. These panikkars were venerated as spiritual masters or gurus by their warrior disciples.<sup>12</sup>

Of course there were other powerful martial groups in the Malabar region, including the indigenous Malayalam-speaking Shafi'i Muslims, the Mappilas. What is less well known is the fact that the St Thomas Christians also acquired a central place in this martial culture. They appear in early copper-plate charters as an élite warrior group, 'bearers of the curved sword' in the words of one such royal declaration.<sup>13</sup> Their skills were as important to the rulers of the southern Keralan chiefdoms as those of the Nayar élite; they were treated by their Hindu rulers as members of a ritually superior caste group equivalent in status to the upper Nayar warrior groups, and their lifestyle and religious traditions linked them to this same wider world of martial skills and martial cult activity.

Traveller after traveller marvelled at the Syrians' martial prowess:

ilz [the Syrians] sont fort robustes, gras, & lá meilleure gent de guerre de tout le Malabar, plus addroite aux armes; d'ou aduient, que si les Roys ont en leur guerres de ces Chrestiens de S. Thomas, en iceux gist la force de l'armée.<sup>14</sup>

The Syrians also observed the bonds of ritualised fealty and patronage which bound Kerala's client warrior groups to their rulers. In 1551 a body

<sup>12</sup> Fuller, *The Nayars Today*, contains an extensive bibliography of Nayar ethnography. See Dames, ed., *Duarte Barbosa*, II, pp. 38–40, 45–9; Manuel de Faria Y Sousa, *The Portugues Asia* [sic]. Trans. J. Stephens, I (London, 1694), p. 101; and Philip Baldeaus, *A True and Exact Description of the Most Celebrated East India Coasts* ... in A. and J. Churchill, eds., *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (London, 1704), III, p. 644; H. Drury, 'Notes of an excursion along the Travancore backwater', p. 205, in *MJLS* (n.s.), 3:5 (1857), pp. 203–19; K.P. Padmanabha Menon, *A History of Kerala* (4 vols., New Delhi, 1982–6), I, pp. 469–76.

<sup>13</sup> C. Achyuta Menon, *The Cochin State Manual* (Ernakulam, 1911), pp. 40, 219.

<sup>14</sup> 'They [the Syrians] are very robust, stout, and the best fighters in all Malabar, also skilled with weaponry; whence it comes that if the Kings go to war with these Christians [in their service], in them resides the strength of the army.' Gouvea, *Histoire*, p. 307.

of St Thomas Christian *caver* fighters bound by an oath of suicide to the raja of Vatakkumkur defeated the army of the raja of Cochin and killed the Cochin ruler himself.<sup>15</sup> Another sixteenth-century raja of Cochin was said to employ a particularly large unit of Syrian 'harquebousiers' – as many as 50,000 according to one account.<sup>16</sup> Both Nayar and Syrian warriors honoured the sworn *caver* fighters who were bound by a vow or *nercca* to serve their patron to the point of death. Syrians also shared in the other main institutions of this warrior culture. Hindu panikkars took Christian youths as their pupils, and there were also many Syrian panikkar lineages. Among the best known warrior preceptors in the pre-colonial period were the Malittas of Mavelikkara, a family of Christian panikkars who created their own networks of both Hindu and Christian trainee disciples. Keralan rulers drew on these preceptoral networks to build up their alliance and affiliation networks. Every youth presented ceremonial tokens of fealty to his ruling lord when he completed his kalari training; he in turn was presented with a sword. Such exchanges resembled the prestations of cloth and ceremonial khelat at a Muslim darbar. They secured the bonds of blood and affiliation which linked the warrior to his chief or raja, and this too was a rite which Syrians performed alongside Nayars and other Hindu warriors.<sup>17</sup>

Under the formally Hindu rulers of Malabar these Syrian warrior lineages were rewarded for their services with royal grants and privileges, and many of the group's most important churches have foundation accounts which focus on the role of indigenous kings as patrons and benefactors. The church at Purakkat is one of many Syrian foundations which is said to have been built by a Malayali raja after a victory which was won for him by his Christian warriors. At Kanjirapalli the main church has a foundation account which asserts that the raja of Tekkumkur provided timber and funds for the structure when it was built in 1449. Many other Syrian churches are believed to have been placed under the special protection of Malayali Hindu rulers during this period.<sup>18</sup>

These accounts of church-building and benefaction by Malayali rulers provide one of the clearest indications of the Syrians' integration within the wider 'Hindu' society of the region – the term 'integration' being

<sup>15</sup> Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, p. 286.

<sup>16</sup> Gouvea, *Histoire*, p. 243.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 137–9, 305, 308; Anantakrishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, p. 55. See also Dames, ed., *Duarte Barbosa*, II, pp. 40, 48; Kunju Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, p. 284; Menon, *Cochin Manual*, p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> John Nieuhoff, *Voyages and Travels into Brazil and the East Indies*, in A. and J. Churchill, eds., *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (London, 1704), II, p. 262; A. Sreedhara Menon, ed., *Kerala District Gazetteers* (8 vols., Trivandrum, 1962–4) Kottayam, p. 516; *Alleppey*, p. 54; Anantakrishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, p. 176; Thomas Whitehouse, *Lingerings of Light in a Dark Land* (London, 1873), p. 119.

used here to convey a position of high status and acceptance within the region's most prestigious social and religious institutions. Hindu rulers endowed and protected Syrian churches in the same way as they patronised Hindu temples. These acts of benefaction served to incorporate the Syrians' holy places into the networks of shrines and temples which comprised the Hindu king's domain. But while the Syrians possessed their own shrines and cult traditions and were endowed with privileged grants and benefactions for these sites, their church rites were also part of a common martial culture which linked them to the region's other warrior groups – to the upper Nayar groups, and more tenuously, to south India's arms-bearing Muslim populations.

The key events in the Syrians' sacred calendar are the great *cāttam* festivals which commemorate the death anniversaries of deceased saints and holy men. In past centuries these rites had much in common with south Indian Muslim urs celebrations. They were equally close to Malayali Hindu temple festivals: until well into the nineteenth century most Syrian cattams included offerings (*nerccas*) of sacrificial cocks as at the shrines of the Nayars' warrior goddesses as well as distributions of consecrated foodstuffs resembling Hindu *prasatam* (offerings).<sup>19</sup> In addition, the St Thomas Christians observed the same rules of ritual purity as the upper Nayar subdivisions, and were accorded the same position within the region's elaborate gradations of caste rank and ritual purity. One early traveller observed,

Toutes les autres sortes de getz [*sic*] sont viles & basses en leur endroit, desquelles il y en a beaucoup au Malabar, & les tiennet les autres comme esclaves. . . & sont en cela tant affligez, que pour n'attoucher point a un Naire [Nayar], & n'en approcher pas de pres, quand ilz se rencontrent, ces pauvres gens, s'esloignent pour laisser passer les Naires ou les Chrestiens, & se separent en telle distance, que nulle chose sienne le puisse toucher. . .<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Fra Paolino da San Bartolomeo, *A Voyage to the East Indies*. Trans. William Johnston (London, 1800; first pub. 1796), p. 198. See also Stephen F. Dale and M. Gangadhara Menon, 'Nerccas: saint-martyr worship among the Muslims of Kerala', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London 41:3 (1978), pp. 523–38. See also Mackworth, *Diary of a Tour*, p. 66; Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, pp. 267–8; *CM Record* 1831, pp. 118–20; Anantakrishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, pp. 178, 186–7; see also Decrees of the Synod of 'Diamper' [Udayamperur] of 1599. [English translation in James Hough, *The History of Christianity in India* (5 vols., London, 1839–60), II, pp. 511–683]. [hereafter Synod] III:ix, p. 540; VIII:xxv, p. 659. These decrees comprise a lengthy analysis of the Syrians' religious beliefs and practices; see below, pp. 266–8.

<sup>20</sup> 'All other kinds of people are vile and low with regard to them, of whom there are many in Malabar, and consider the others as slaves . . . and are thereby so much afflicted, that in order not to touch a Nayar, and not to come near when they meet, these poor people shrink from them to let the Nayars or the Christians pass, and keep themselves at such a distance that none of them can touch them.' Gouvea, *Histoire*, p. 315.

Another reported, 'there is no distinction either in their habits or in their hair, or in any thing else, betwixt the [Syrian] Christians of this diocese and the heathen Naires'.<sup>21</sup>

Most other early European observers bracketed the Syrians and the Nayar warrior groups in this way, and it was even suggested that members of the two groups intermarried as late as the last quarter of the sixteenth century.<sup>22</sup> For many centuries the Syrian Christians performed *sraddhas* (oblations to the family dead which also remove the ritual pollution caused by death) just as Hindus did. Many of their birth, puberty and marriage rites were almost indistinguishable from domestic rituals enacted by high-ranking Hindu Malayalis, and they shared the same terminology for many of these rites with the region's caste Hindus.<sup>23</sup> These and other customs which the Syrians shared with caste Hindus must be seen as much more than superficial borrowings from Hinduism – mere 'accretions' as the European missionaries maintained. In fact they were rites which safeguarded the Syrians' corporate substance and guaranteed their status within a shared moral order which was defined in terms of gradations of ritual purity and pollution. It was through adherence to these standards that the Syrians had come to be classed as *savarna*, persons of clean caste and standing in the Hindu moral order. In consequence they were granted one of the most critical signs of ritual status within the society, the right of access to Hindu temples and sacred precincts.

Until the nineteenth century this was the most conspicuous distinction between the Syrians and all low-ranking social groups within the region. Throughout the region strict rules of exclusion banned low-ranking persons from Hindu temple precincts and from the streets and ceremonial procession routes adjoining temples, palaces and other places associated with both royal and divine power. From the earliest period of missionary-led conversion these bans applied to low-caste Hindus including low-ranking Ezhava toddy-tappers and cultivators as well as untouchable Cherumas and Pulayas, and also to Christians converted from low-caste

<sup>21</sup> Synod IX:xvii, pp. 678–9.

<sup>22</sup> A Jesuit account of 1579 stated, 'there is no pollution between the Christians of St Thomas and the Nayres, nor penalty of death, if there are between them marriages or friendships, all of which arises, according to the custom of the country, for castes higher or lower than these two'. Quoted in T.K. Joseph, 'Malabar miscellany', *The Indian Antiquary* 57:712 (1928), p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Synod IX:ii, iii, pp. 669–71; Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, VI, pp. 445–6, 450; Anantakrishna Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, II, pp. 91–6. Also Anantakrishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, pp. 92–3, 103, 200–1; Placid J. Podipara, 'The Social and Socio-ecclesiastical Customs of the Syrian Christians of India', *The Eastern Churches Quarterly* 7:4 (1947), pp. 222–36; T.K. Velu Pillai, *The Travancore State Manual*, IV, p. 812; Menon, *Cochin Manual*, p. 226.

fishing and agricultural caste groups. In practice, since virtually all thoroughfares were built to accommodate some kind of sacred or ceremonial function, this meant that low-caste Christians were barred from just about every town and village street in Malabar, as they were in many other parts of south India. During the nineteenth century this became a great issue amongst reform-minded evangelical missionaries, but in fact these rules of exclusion were noted as early as 1514, when the Portuguese had only just begun to convert low-caste Malayalis. Interestingly, within at least some Keralan kingdoms, most notably in Cochin, recent Muslim converts – again, persons of low-caste origins – were subject to the same ban. As in the other Keralan domains and chiefdoms, the St Thomas Christians of Cochin were the only local Christians who were regarded as non-polluting: they alone were allowed access to urban streets and temple precincts.<sup>24</sup>

The most striking proof of the Syrians' standing in the pre-colonial Keralan kingdoms was the fact that members of leading Syrian lineages held the status of donors – honoured patrons and sponsors – at Hindu shrines and temple festivals all over southern Kerala.<sup>25</sup> There were even areas in which ties between Nayars and St Thomas Christians were so close that these donor roles were reciprocal. In many parts of Malabar Nayars accepted Syrians as participants and donors in local temple rites and took part in turn in Syrian church festivals. This acknowledgement of the Syrians' right to share Hindu 'sacred space' was expressed in some centres by the construction of Syrian churches on sites virtually adjoining Hindu temples (as at Niranom, Cennanur, Parur and Kallupara, where such churches were built in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries). Christians used Hindu-style torches, umbrellas and banners in their cattam festivals, and some localities actually had a single collection of processional regalia which was shared between both church and Hindu temple. At least one Hindu temple regularly lent out its temple elephants to Syrian worshippers for use in their festival processions, much like the Srirangam authorities who still lend their elephant to the Nathar Wali dargah.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India. The Beginnings to AD 1707* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 118.

<sup>25</sup> Interviews of Syrian families with former donor traditions in Shertallai and elsewhere (Aug.–Sept. 1977.) See Synod IX:iv, pp. 670–1; Brown *Indian Christians*, p. 171; Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, p. 241; Paolino, *Voyage*, pp. 129, 670–1; *CM Record* 19:10 (1848), pp. 206–7.

<sup>26</sup> Podipara, 'Customs of the Syrian Christians', pp. 222–36, p. 234; Brown, *Indian Christians*, p. 172; Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, pp. 69–70, 240–1; Gouvea, *Histoire*, pp. 264–5; Podipara, 'Malabar Rite', p. 95, in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* (New York, 1967), IX, pp. 92–6; *Proceedings of the Second and Third Meetings of the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly*, Trivandrum, 1905–6, pp. 66, 132.

### **The Syrians and their west Asian church links**

Long before the St Thomas Christians came into contact with European missionaries, the group had built up a deep-rooted attachment to the Christian primates of west Asia. The headquarters of these overseas churches were located at different times in Mardin, Mosul and other centres in what is now Turkey and Iraq, and the St Thomas Christians' earliest ties were probably to the line of Nestorian or 'east Syrian' primates who used the title 'Catholicos of Babylon'. (In Nestorian doctrine, which the Roman Catholic church views as heretical, the divine and human persons of Christ are perceived as separate entities.) Until the sixteenth century this line of primates had their headquarters in the monastic centre of Mosul, now in northern Iraq. In 1551 the Nestorian Catholicate split into two rival lines: these came to be based in various monastic centres including Mosul and Diyarbakir in Kurdistan (now in southeastern Turkey.) It has also been claimed that the Syrians were originally affiliated to a line of primates known as the 'west Syrian' or 'Jacobite' Patriarchs of Antioch; these are the patriarchs to whom large numbers of St Thomas Christians attached themselves in the second half of the seventeenth century. From this century onward these west Asian church leaders were based near Mardin, also in Kurdistan in what is now eastern Turkey. They adhere to the Monophysite doctrine which regards the divine and human persons of Christ as a single indivisible entity.<sup>27</sup>

This has meant that for at least the last 400 years and probably for very much longer, one or both of these west Asian churches have been regarded as the source of the Syrians' faith and the point from which their saint-heroes and legendary founder-figures derive their power. Until the sixteenth century the Syrians had only loose and intermittent contacts with these overseas patriarchates. In practice their chief clerics were hereditary archdeacons (later known as *metrans*) from a powerful local lineage, the Pakalamarrams, whose ancestral home was the ancient trading centre of Kuravilanat. As far as is known, their communities did not possess any centralised ecclesiastical structure, and there were no parishes or indigenous bishops as in the western Christian churches. What they had instead were about 100 churches, including the shrines which were said to have been built by St Thomas, and the churches which were linked to the hero-bishops Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh. The Kuravilanat church was also a shrine of great power and sanctity. The Pakalamarrams maintained that their ancestors had been chosen for the

<sup>27</sup> Eugene Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India*. Trans. E.R. Hambye (London, 1957), pp. 192–6; A.M. Mundadan, 'Indian Church and the East Syrian Church', *ICHR* 6:1 (1972), pp. 23–42.

priesthood by St Thomas himself, and it was through this claim and their hereditary command of the Kuravilanat church that the family was able to establish itself as the group's pre-eminent priestly line.<sup>28</sup>

For each Keralan church there was a group of hereditary priests (*katanars*) who performed marriages, baptisms and other life-cycle rituals and presided over the group's cattam or saint-cult feasts. These katanars belonged to an élite sub-division of the St Thomas Christians. All members of this group were deemed to be 'ordainable' even though relatively few of them ever passed beyond the lower ranks of the deaconate (Syriac *msamsana* or *samasa*): ordination or the right of potential ordination had come to serve as a mark of social rank and ceremonial precedence within the group.<sup>29</sup>

The role of the hereditary Pakalamarram archdeacons was comparable to that of a Muslim or west Asian Christian holy man. Through his office, his command of the group's key shrines and his practice of bodily austerities – archdeacons remained celibate; the office was passed from uncle to nephew – the archdeacon possessed a measure of spiritual power resembling the barakat of a middle eastern Christian monk or Muslim Sufi. His performance of liturgical rites served to transmit this power, and these acts confirmed the authority of the priesthood and maintained the spiritual integrity of the wider population. Within the churches of west Asia the primate or patriarch was regarded as the source of this sanctifying energy, and it was dispensed to other clerics through acts of consecration and ordination. Thus like initiates in a Sufi tariqa (mystical order), bishops and priests were bound and united by the chain of spiritual authority emanating from the primate. It was necessary for this power to be renewed periodically, if possible through the application of sacred muron or holy oil from one of the west Asian patriarchs; the priesthood's collective inheritance of sacred power could be weakened or lost if the chain was broken.<sup>30</sup>

This is why the most consistent trend in the history of the St Thomas Christians has been a continual quest for contact with west Asian primates

<sup>28</sup> Anantakrishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, pp. 2–3, 17.

<sup>29</sup> W.S. Hunt, *The Anglican Church in Travancore and Cochin 1816–1916*, I (Kottayam, 1920), p. 39; Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, VI, p. 448; Synod VII: i, xvi, xxiii, pp. 615–16, 624–5, 630.

<sup>30</sup> Ferrolì, *The Jesuits in Malabar*, I, pp. 177–8; Mundadan, *Traditions of St Thomas Christians*, pp. 140–6. See also Peter Brown, 'The rise and function of the holy man in late antiquity' *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), pp. 80–101; W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 260–1; Frend, 'The missions of the early church' in Frend, ed., *Religion Popular and Unpopular in the Early Christian Centuries* (London, 1976), pp. 3–23.

and bishops. They alone possessed the power to perform acts of consecration and thus restore the spiritual energy possessed by the Syrians' priests and primates. For many centuries, all west Asian clerics who arrived in Malabar were greeted with ecstatic veneration. While they lived they were honoured as human repositories of miraculous sacred power, and after their deaths they were entombed within the precincts of one of the great Keralan churches; their power was transmitted to the enclosing tomb shrine and to the hereditary priestly lineages who controlled the site. Like Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh whose veneration was most strongly associated with shrines at Quilon, Paravur and Kayamkulam, such clerics were (and still are) feted and invoked by the local population – Hindu and Christian alike – in the group's great commemorative cattam feasts.<sup>31</sup>

For over 500 years, the Syrians have perceived these overseas church notables as links in a continuing chain of prelate-saints stretching back to the group's original heroes and progenitors, and thus ultimately back to St Thomas himself. Like the devotees of Indian Muslim pirs, the St Thomas Christians revere their entombed saint figures as founders of the community: they are part of a living devotional tradition through which the group has come to define itself within the wider society. Here too, as in the Sufi tradition, the sanctity of individual shrines is related to a broader context of shared belief and worship. The legends and cult texts stress the prelate's connections with the Christian centres of west Asia. Thus like the Sufis whose tazkiras or biographical accounts include visits to the great Muslim holy places outside India, the Christian saint-heroes provide a link to the group's ultimate sources of spiritual power and energy. These sites too are perceived as being located in great centres of spiritual power and authority which exist far beyond the Indian frontier.

Furthermore, the legends and copper plate deeds which cite the role of Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh and Thomas of Cana indicate that the Christian founder heroes and prelate-saints are perceived as having secured the Syrians' rights and honours within the Hindu kingdoms in which they originally settled. This corresponds to the notion of the Muslim pir as a founder-guarantor in the period when Muslim communities were first

<sup>31</sup> Until they were destroyed in 1510, the church at Quilon contained tombs which were revered as the burial sites of Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh. The most important eighteenth-century shrines were the tomb of the west Asian prelate Mar Gabriel (in Kerala 1708–31) in the Cheriapalli church at Kottayam, and the tomb of the west Asian bishop Mar Basilius (d. 1794) at Kottamankalam. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries important cattams were celebrated at these sites and at Manukatti, Paravur, Kananakot, Mulanturutti and Puttenkarai. E.M. Philip, *The Indian Church of St Thomas* (Kottayam, 1907), p. 185; Richard Collins, *Missionary Enterprise in the East* (London, 1873), pp. 143–8; *CM Record* 1831, p. 118; T.K. Joseph, 'Malabar miscellany', pp. 46–8, *IA*, 5:57 (1928), p. 46.

being established in the south Indian Hindu domains, and even as a sovereign lord in his own right. In this sense the Syrians' hereditary archdeacons were also a line of sovereign lords. They too had a domain which had been marked out for them by the saint-heroes of the past and by St Thomas himself; they too could claim to be 'little kings' whose power was a form of sovereign authority amongst the Syrians.

The problem with all this was that the coming of these west Asian clerics could never be predicted, and as a result, the Syrians came to look to the Hindu chiefs and rajas of Kerala to renew the authority of their Pakalamarram archdeacons. Certainly by the sixteenth century, the Syrians' chief clerics held office with the recognition and endorsement of southern Kerala's leading local rulers, of whom the most notable were the newly strengthened rajas of Cochin. These were transactions which benefited both sides. By creating a miniature replica of himself, an affiliated 'little king' or subject-ruler, the Keralan raja was able to assert his own rights of kingship. By the time the Portuguese had established themselves in the region, this chain of Christian succession was seen to derive its legitimacy from the power of the Hindu ruler as well as from the group's ties to the west Asian primates and saint-bishops, and the group's chief church notables began to take on the titles and trappings of Malayali kingship. To the astonishment of sixteenth-century European observers the Pakalamarram archdeacons travelled with their own guards of several thousand sworn Christian *caver* warriors, and in 1717 a Dutch traveller encountered one of these chief clerics entering the town of Cochin 'attended by a number of soldiers bearing swords and shields, in imitation of the Princes of Malabar'.<sup>32</sup>

### Christianity and Portuguese expansion

These links with local rulers might have produced a viable system of leadership and authority for the Syrians had it not been for the additional pressures which they experienced as the Portuguese established their new system of colonial trade and strategic alliances along the south Indian coastline. When the Portuguese founded their first *feitoria* or trading station on the Malabar coast in 1498, the region's fabulously profitable pepper trade was dominated by west Asian Muslim seafarers based at Calicut. From the end of the fourteenth-century, the partnership between these traders and the Calicut domain's ruling Hindu Zamorins

<sup>32</sup> Jacob Canter Visscher, *Letters from Malabar*, trans. Heber Drury (Madras, 1862; first pub. 1796), p. 103; and see T.K. Joseph 'Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh', *IA* 57:714 (1928), pp. 46-8; Gouvea, *Histoire*, pp. 134-62; Brown, *Indian Christians*, pp. 26-8, 95.

transformed this locality and its hinterland into the most powerful of the Malabar port-kingdoms. Portugal's aim was to seize control of these great international commercial networks, to expel the hated 'Moor', and to channel all sea-going vessels on the Indian Ocean spice trading routes through Portuguese customs posts under what was known as the *cartaz* or pass system.<sup>33</sup>

This dream of monopoly and extirpation was never fully realised, but the power of the Calicut Muslims was eventually cut back as the Portuguese built up the chain of settlements and fortified enclaves which came to constitute the *Estado da India*. Within Africa and Asia the Estado was really a loosely structured series of armed trading ventures and coercive tribute-taking operations, rather than an empire of conquest and colonisation. As a result its greatest need was for reliable local allies and client groups. In Malabar the rajas of Cochin were the most important of these local collaborators. The Portuguese built the first of their Indian fortresses at this superb natural harbour site in 1503, and with the backing of the Estado's guns and warships, this minor ruling house soon began to eclipse the Zamorins as Malabar's most powerful ruling lineage.<sup>34</sup>

The next Portuguese fort was built at Tanganasseri (Quilon) in 1519; this was followed by the building of the Cranganur fort in 1537. As in the case of Cochin, both of these key export centres contained sizeable populations of St Thomas Christians. For the Portuguese, the Syrians were the obvious choice in the quest for potential client groups. The myth of Prester John, the hope of finding 'lost' fellow Christians somewhere in the Indies, had been one of the prime lures for the Portuguese navigators as they set out on their original fifteenth-century voyages of exploration.<sup>35</sup> The fact that these sought-after Asian Christians turned out to be skilled warriors and traders with a privileged role in the Keralan port kingdoms made them all the more desirable in the eyes of their would-be European patrons.

As early as 1500, when the second of the Portuguese fleets to reach Malabar was blasting its way along the south Indian coastline, the Portuguese commander Cabral had already secured the services of a Syrian Christian who sailed with the fleet to Cochin and negotiated with the raja about the sale of pepper.<sup>36</sup> How then were the Portuguese to forge

<sup>33</sup> Das Gupta, *Malabar in Asian Trade*, pp. 4–13.

<sup>34</sup> C.R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire 1415–1825* (London, 1969), pp. 39–64; R.B. Wernham, ed., *The New Cambridge Modern History* (Cambridge, 1968), III, pp. 532–58; G.V. Scammell, *The World Encompassed. The First European Maritime Empires c. 800–1650* (London, 1981), pp. 225–300.

<sup>35</sup> J.H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance* (London, 1963), pp. 6–37.

<sup>36</sup> Francis Day, *Land of the Permauls, or Cochin, its Past and its Present* (Madras, 1863), p. 81.

a permanent bond with the rest of the St Thomas Christian population? The answer was soon found: in every region in which the Portuguese operated, the activities of the church soon came to reinforce the Estado's military and commercial pursuits. Under the *Padroado Real* or 'royal patronage', the papacy had granted Portugal the right to control ecclesiastical appointments in all her overseas territories. This became the basis on which the Portuguese built up a massive overseas missionary operation. The term 'Padroado' was applied to this state-backed church system, and within Asia its headquarters was the main Portuguese trading enclave at Goa. In lands as far apart as Japan, south India and the kingdom of the Kongo the Portuguese strengthened their position as a privileged trading power by building up ties of religious affiliation and patronage with local rulers and their élite warrior groups.<sup>37</sup> Initially the Estado's links with the Syrians conformed to the accustomed pattern of prestations from royal benefactors to their privileged clients. With the approval of the Padroado authorities, large cash sums were provided for the extension and adornment of important Syrian churches, most notably at Quilon, where the benefaction was made through the local ruler, and at Cranganur, revered as St Thomas's first landing place in India.<sup>38</sup>

There was a problem though. The arrival of the Portuguese coincided with a sudden strengthening of the Syrians' ties to the west Asian patriarchates. This took the form of an influx of west Asian bishops and attendant monks who arrived in India claiming authority from the Nestorian Catholicos. Between 1503 and 1583 at least nine foreign prelates made their way to the Malabar coast; many more reached the region over the next 300 years. The Syrians received all these monks and bishops with ecstatic adulation; many of them are still revered today as miracle-working holy men and bishop-saints. To the Portuguese these strangers were 'vile Nestorian heretics'; worse yet, they were seeking to rob the Padroado of the authority which would have to be vested in its own priests if the Syrians were to become true clients and allies of Portugal.<sup>39</sup>

It was against this background of contested authority that the Padroado moved to create a great new Portuguese-sponsored pilgrimage centre. This shrine was to be located outside Kerala, and hence out of reach of the Nestorian primates with their dangerous appeal to the Syrians' priestly

<sup>37</sup> See J.K. Fairbank, E.O. Reischauer and A.M. Craig, *East Asia* (London, 1973), pp. 392–5; Oliver, ed., *The Cambridge History of Africa*, III, pp. 548–54; Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 50–103.

<sup>38</sup> Brown, *Indian Churches*, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Mackenzie, 'History of Christianity', pp. 153, 190, 203.

lineages and shrine networks. Its site was at Mylapore, close to the Estado's chief trading station on the Coromandel coast, and it was this locality which the Portuguese built up into the greatest of all south Indian Christian tomb shrines.

The name Mylapore probably derives from the Tamil *mayil*, peacock, the vehicle of the regional Tamil god Murukan, and the locality is well known as the site of the important Saivite temple of Lord Murukan as Sri Kapaleswerar. It seems to have figured in the sacred landscape of the south's indigenous St Thomas cult from a very early period, but the history of the shrine has been obscured by the Estado's success at taking over and reconstituting the tradition of St Thomas's martyrdom. At the beginning of the sixteenth century Mylapore was a prosperous Vijayanagar port with links to the maritime entrepôts of Bengal, Pegu and Malacca.<sup>40</sup> It does not seem to have been a popular Christian cult site at this time, but it was largely because they encountered some kind of local St Thomas legend at the site that the Portuguese decided to found their Coromandel feitoria at this particular port town.

A pair of Portuguese navigators who explored the locality in 1517 reported that they had visited a domed enclosure which they took to be a church. This structure was said to contain a grave site which local residents identified as the burial place of St Thomas. The most striking feature of this account is the travellers' claim to have found the site being tended by a 'Moor', i.e. a Muslim. This guardian pointed out an indented rock which was said to be the footprint of the apostle; the Muslim also claimed that he had been cured of blindness by the saint who lay buried in the tomb.<sup>41</sup>

It is possible that the shrine may have originated as a Christian tomb site but even in 1293, when Marco Polo visited the place and hailed it as the site of St Thomas's martyrdom, it seems already to have been a dargah or pir cult shrine. In addition to the presence of Muslim officiants at the site, the references to blindness and healing as well as the veneration of the sacred footprint convey a strong flavour of Muslim cult worship. There is evidence of Christian pilgrimage to a St Thomas shrine somewhere near Mylapore in the period before the arrival of the Portuguese, and there seem to have been Christian trading people, possibly offshoots of the Malabar Syrians, in the vicinity. Whatever its true origins, the Portuguese took the site over and sent in a team of

<sup>40</sup> K.V. Raman, *The Early History of the Madras Region* (Madras, 1957), pp. 30–2.

<sup>41</sup> Herman D'Souza, *In the Steps of St Thomas* (Poona, 1964), pp. 36–7.

excavators in 1523. A collection of bones was uncovered and these were formally certified as the remains of St Thomas.<sup>42</sup>

Almost immediately the Portuguese settlement near the site was renamed St Thome (or Sao Tome de Meliapor) and the Portuguese proceeded to create an elaborate sacred geography which mapped the sites of the saint's death and burial onto prominent features of the local landscape. As a result the sites which are now known as centres of the cult in Madras – the 300-foot hill known as St Thomas's Mount with its miraculous bleeding cross, the Little Mount and the collection of St Thomas relics in St Thome Cathedral – acquired their reputation as holy places through the sponsorship of the Portuguese colonial authorities. (The Little Mount is known as the site of St Thomas's forest refuge: there is a cave on this hill in which the apostle is said to have hidden while being pursued by his assassins. The Little Mount also has a miraculous fountain which is said to have been formed when the apostle struck the ground with his stick.)<sup>43</sup>

Opulent shrines and churches were then built on the spots which the church authorities chose to identify as key points in the saint's death struggle. Most of these date from the 1540s and 1550s, when the Portuguese were beginning their campaign to impose a new form of strict Padroado-centred church discipline on the Syrians. The Estado also built up the cult by initiating lavish festival celebrations in the new St Thome shrines and churches. The most important of these was the feast of the Exaltation of Our Lady, first celebrated in 1558. It was during this festival that the shrine's great cross was first seen to bleed, an event which was repeated many times over the next 400 years. It has been noted that the bleeding of miraculous cult objects is also a common motif amongst south Indian Hindus and Muslims. These bleedings or 'sweatings' are signs of great power, and the Mylapore cross became an object of intense

<sup>42</sup> Brown, *Indian Christians*, pp. 56–7. The St Thome cathedral in Mylapore has a sixteenth-century reliquary which is supposed to have housed the remains of St Thomas. See B.A. Figredo, *Bones of St Thomas and the Antique Casket at Mylapore, Madras* (Madras, 1972). The Mylapore shrine may have been a dargah revered by local Christian traders, or it may have originated as a Christian cult site which local Muslims came to venerate. (This suggests a parallel with saints such as Sikander who were viewed as honorary Muslims.) Barbosa reports a Muslim 'fakir' tending the site in 1504. Dames, ed., *Duarte Barbosa*, II, p. 129; see also Gouvea, *Histoire*, p. 306 and A. Meersman, *The Franciscans in Tamilnad* (Schoneck-Beckenried, 1962), p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> D'Souza, *Steps of St Thomas*, pp. 45–6. The miraculous stick legend invites comparison with stories of the sacred staffs of Tamil pirs such as Kulumai Sahib and the Penukonda pir Baba Fakiruddin. See above, p. 138.

reverence in south India, attracting huge crowds of devotees whenever a new emanation of blood was reported.<sup>44</sup>

The creation of this new cult shrine may be understood in part as a product of new trends within the late mediaeval church. Throughout western Europe there was a move towards shrine-building and the popularisation of saint cults with their associated holy places and cult relics. Indeed it was largely through her lavishness as a church-builder and a patron of overseas missions that Portugal came to be regarded as a great power in Europe. At the same time the glorification of Mylapore was a timely move in the struggle to establish Portugal as a military and commercial power in the south Indian maritime trading zone. The St Thomas cult came to attract devotees from a wide range of other communities, Hindu as well as Christian, in addition to the Syrians themselves. But it was the Syrians who regarded St Thomas as a tutelary patron and guarantor of their élite position in Keralan society. By supporting the St Thomas shrines the Padroado was bringing new refinement to its role as pious royal benefactor. This was a role which was analagous to that of the region's Muslim and Hindu rulers. As has been seen, pre-colonial rulers forged bonds of alliance and affiliation with warrior clans and other strategically placed client groups by endowing holy places, especially shrines connected with the tutelary saints and deities of their new client groups.

Here though, rather than simply channelling benefactions to the Syrian's existing holy places in Kerala, the Portuguese established a new series of rites and pilgrimage centres for the group. Padroado officials disseminated new versions of the cult legend which focused on the powers of the relics enshrined at St Thome and on the sacred significance of the two Mounts. Within a few years of the site's excavation, the Portuguese authorities had begun to organise mass pilgrimages of Syrians and other Christians who were brought to Mylapore from Cochin and other localities on the Malabar coast.

<sup>44</sup> Anantakrishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, pp. 171–3. The St Thome cross is thought to be one of the remains of the early west Asian Christian migrants to Tamilnad. Bleedings occurred throughout the sixteenth-century and well into the nineteenth. (D'Souza, *Steps of St Thomas*, pp. 58–65.) The church which was built on St Thomas's Mount (the *periya malai* or Great Mount) was begun in 1523 and extended in 1547. (*Ibid.* p. 53.) Mass was being celebrated in a cave on the Little Mount (the *cinna malai*) by 1559 and a church was built next to the cave in 1551. (*Ibid.* pp. 45–6.) Kerala's most famous miraculous cross is situated in Cranganur. Hindus and Christians revered it for its miraculous healing power and made offerings of oil and other substances at the site. Gouvea, *Histoire*, pp. 264–5; Day, *Land of the Permauls*, p. 261.

### Martyrs and heretics

As they constructed the Mylapore cult sites the Portuguese saw themselves as the bearers of true Christianity in a land of infidels, heathens and heretics. In Europe the Council of Trent (1545–63) had begun its great task of formulating a definitive body of Roman Catholic doctrinal precepts in response to the challenges posed by the Protestant Reformers. The result was that in India as elsewhere in Asia this renewed insistence on purity and orthodoxy was investing the Padroado's activities with a new aggressiveness.<sup>45</sup> But while it was intended as a showpiece of the new reinvigorated Catholicism, Mylapore would never have become south India's most potent Christian pilgrimage place without a powerful inheritance of both Hindu and Muslim cult associations.

In Marco Polo's version of the cult legend, St Thomas was killed accidentally by a 'Govi' huntsman who was trying to shoot a peacock with his bow and arrow and hit the apostle instead. Virtually all the cult traditions, both those collected by western travellers and those written or recounted by the St Thomas Christians themselves, give a similar account of the saint's death: the apostle is pierced by a lance or arrow, and the figure of the peacock is given a central place in the story.<sup>46</sup> There is obviously more here than a set of parallels with Muslim and Hindu cult legends. The St Thomas tradition has well-documented west Asian origins and the main elements of the story – the saint's martyrdom and the miraculous welling-up of his blood, the gushing of holy fountains, even the peacock – have all had a place in the symbolism of the eastern churches for many centuries. Incised peacocks appear on one of the ancient Pehlevi-inscribed crosses in the Valiyappalli or 'old church' at Kottayam in central Kerala; there are peacocks on the stone door lintels of several other ancient Keralan churches, and the domed shrine discovered by the two Portuguese travellers in 1517 is supposed to have been decorated with carved plaster peacocks.

In early Christian iconography the peacock was a symbol of the resurrection. Its flesh was thought to be incorruptible, and it was often imbued with the same properties as the phoenix which rises miraculously unconsumed from the flames. This is certainly a meaning which can be attached to the many south Indian traditions of St Thomas and the peacocks. For example, in one account of his martyrdom the saint is shot

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Boxer, *Portuguese Seaborne Empire*, pp. 268–71 on the activities of the Portuguese Inquisition in Goa.

<sup>46</sup> L.F. Benedetto, ed., *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Trans. Aldo Ricci (London, 1931), pp. 298–9, 311–12.

by a huntsman aiming at the most beautiful bird in a flock of peacocks. The arrow strikes the bird, and it is then transformed into a man who is revealed as the apostle. The story also says that a human footprint is left behind on the stone slab from which the wounded bird arises. As in many tales of Christian martyrdom, this can be taken as a parable of Christian resurrection: the saint dies at the hands of his attackers but rises again in glory.<sup>47</sup>

At the same time the motif of the wounded but triumphant hero-divinity conveys unmistakable echoes of Muslim and Hindu devotional tradition. Here again, as in countless tales of south Indian cult divinities, there are miraculous staffs and fountains, and there is the transforming power of the blood which gushes from the body of the martyred saint. It has already been noted that the saint was perceived as a healer of blindness and other bodily afflictions; some early travellers reported that pilgrims collected dust from the Mylapore shrine and used it as a healing agent.<sup>48</sup> The sacred foot impression is an image which figures in many south Indian pir cults as well as in Hindu worship throughout the sub-continent: the Trichy Rock contains a footprint associated simultaneously with Lord Vishnu and with the Trichy saint Nathar Wali.

The forest pir Kat Bava also comes to mind here. For the Kallar warriors who venerate this saint, Kat Bava too is a martyr-hero. Amongst his south Indian devotees the apostle came to possess many of the attributes which these groups ascribe to their tutelary pirs. At his cult centres in Kerala and Tamilnad the apostle is generally perceived as an ascetic, as a fierce misogynist, and also as a figure of the wilderness. There is a strong echo of the Kat Bava tradition in these accounts of the apostle as the victim of huntsmen, that is of men from the wilderness and forest margins, and also in accounts of the apostle in his jungle cave retreat. As in the case of these Tamil pir cults there seems to have been a very similar merging of motifs and cult traditions in the evolution of the St Thomas tradition. The apparent links with Tamil Hindu tradition are equally notable here. The peacock is the *vāhana* or vehicle of the Saivite deity Murukan or Subrahmanya, and the lance with which St Thomas is martyred is also one of the emblems of the deity. The excavation of the grave site which the Portuguese identified as St Thomas' tomb is said to have uncovered a leaf-shaped lance or *vēl* which had been buried with the

<sup>47</sup> See F.E. Keay, *A History of the Syrian Church in Indian* (Madras, 1938), pp. 12–14; Brown, *Indian Christians*, p. 203; Figredo, *Bones* pp. 2–3; Love, *Vestiges*, I, p. 287. The friezes on these churches also include crosses and the auspicious Hindu lotus symbol.

<sup>48</sup> *Marco Polo*, pp. 310–11.

martyr's body; this supposed instrument of the apostle's martyrdom became an important relic at the shrine.<sup>49</sup>

What this suggests is that the tradition of St Thomas at Mylapore came to overlap with the worship of Lord Murukan, just as many pirs in the Tamil country have become associated with this divine Hindu warrior who is worshipped as an embodiment of chaste and uncorrupted youth. As David Shulman has shown, the wounding and resurrection of the divine figure is a central motif in the Tamil Saivite tradition, just as it is in south Indian Sufism. In the worship of Lord Murukan the Saivite themes of salvation and resurrection have come to be linked to the figure of the god's peacock. The great shore temple at Tiruccentur is venerated as the site of the god's battle with the *asura* Surapadma. According to the local stalapurana accounts, the demon transforms himself into a mango tree in the middle of the ocean and the god splits the tree with his lance. From the pieces is formed a peacock which rises up from the sea to become the god's faithful devotee. Here the theme of resurrection is expressed through the image of the peacock: the bird rises from the sea, which is the domain of disorder and primordial darkness, and enters a new life of cleansed and purified discipleship. The symbolism is not all that distant from the Christian view of the resurrection.<sup>50</sup>

At an early point the St Thomas tradition seems to have merged with two existing local religious traditions, the cult of one or more Muslim pirs with cult shrines in the vicinity of Mylapore, and the worship of the Hindu deity Murukan-Subrahmanya. This fusion would have been facilitated by the parallels which existed, at least at the level of popular belief and worship, between Hindu, Muslim and Christian ideas of resurrection and martyrdom. The St Thomas cult would therefore appear to have strong local roots in the Tamil coastal region and to have been firmly established as a devotional tradition well before the arrival of the Portuguese. Therefore this was certainly not a case of Europeans implanting an alien tradition of worship in a society of previously untouched 'pure' Hindus.

Nevertheless the Portuguese did take over the Mylapore site, and it was through their patronage and support that the shrine was transformed from a minor local cult centre into one of the most ardently venerated

<sup>49</sup> Neill, *History of Christianity*, I, p. 35; and see Figredo, *Bones*, on the interlocking Hindu, Christian and Muslim motifs in the St Thomas reliquary and its links with Mylapore's Saivite devotional tradition.

<sup>50</sup> Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, pp. 43–4, 73; Shulman, 'Murukan, the Mango, and Ekambaresvara-Siva', in *Indo-Iranian Journal* 21 (1979), pp. 27–40; Clothey, *Murukan*, pp. 121–2.

centres of Christian cult worship in south India. For the St Thomas Christians there were important advantages to be gained from an association with this glittering new pilgrimage place. But the development of the Mylapore site was only part of the campaign which the Padroado authorities now began to direct at the Syrians. Within Malabar the standard bearers of the new Tridentine orthodoxy were the Jesuits who had arrived in India in 1542. In the view of these ferociously dedicated missionaries the only way to secure the Syrians as loyal subjects of Portugal was to make them acknowledge the Pope as their sole source of spiritual authority, to break their allegiance to their 'heretical' west Asian bishops and primates, and to purge them of forms of worship which failed to conform to the new conventions of Roman Catholic orthodoxy.

By the 1560s the Jesuits were using their influence over the southern Keralan rajas to have them proscribe and harry the group's west Asian prelates. They even induced the raja of Cochin to withdraw his recognition from the Syrians' chief Malayali cleric. The Pakalamarram archdeacon had been resisting the missionaries' attempts to 'reform' church ritual and expunge 'heretic' saints and hero-figures from the Syrians' sacred calendar; the Portuguese actually destroyed the tombs at Quilon which were believed to contain the remains of Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh.<sup>51</sup> The Jesuits scrutinised every detail of priestly activity; the spectacle of a married and hereditary clergy aroused particular outrage. The Padroado authorities also seized as many Syriac and Malayalam devotional and religious texts as they could find. Those deemed to be carriers of heretical Nestorian teachings were either burnt or expurgated, and the group's ancient Syriac liturgy was brought into line with official Roman Catholic forms.<sup>52</sup>

In 1599, in the course of a church synod held at the Christian locality of Udayamperur ('Diamper') the Padroado authorities induced the entire Syrian priesthood to repudiate their allegiance to the west Asian Catholicos, to abjure all un-Catholic doctrines and observances, and to swear allegiance to the Roman See. Large numbers of Syrians have retained an attachment to papal authority ever since.<sup>53</sup> The decrees of the Synod constituted an explicit affirmation of Tridentine church teachings;

<sup>51</sup> Mackenzie, *History of Christianity*, p. 156.

<sup>52</sup> Saints' images do not seem to have been used in Syrian churches before the arrival of the Jesuits; the sacraments of confession, confirmation and extreme unction were also unknown. Brown, *Indian Christians*, p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> Castets, 'The caste question in Indian church history', *Archives de la nouvelle mission du Maduré* (typescript), V, pp. 282-3 (n.d.) MMA; K.N. Daniel, 'Rome and the Malabar Church' *Kerala Society Papers* 2:10 (1932), pp. 47-61; A.M. Mundadan, 'The invalidity of the Synod of Diamper', *ICHR* 1:1 (1967), pp. 9-22; V.C. Samuel *et al.*, 'Discussion: the Synod of Diamper as an ecumenical problem' *ICHR* 1:1 (1967), pp. 23-8.

they took the form of a carefully researched analysis of the group's social and religious life, underlining all the customs and practices which stood in need of correction. Here too the missionaries saw themselves as purist campaigners with the power to enforce a code of strict scriptural orthodoxy on a population of erring parishioners. But like many would-be reformers of 'un-Islamic' Asian Muslim societies, the Malabar Jesuits could not remake the Syrians' world-view, or their conception of sacred power and authority. The veneration of the other great cult saints carried on as before; the many surviving holy tomb shrines retained their ancient power, and new sites were constantly added to the region's sacred landscape as west Asian bishops continued to make their way to Kerala. Even the hereditary priestly lineages survived; some adopted celibacy in conformity with Padroado regulations but managed to pass on their titles through the system of uncle to nephew succession.<sup>54</sup>

In some cases the Portuguese actually reinforced existing Syrian traditions. Their sponsorship of the Mylapore shrine gave a new dimension to the cult of St Thomas; the revised schedule of festivals which they produced included all the old St Thomas commemorations as well as the more conventional feasts of the Roman Catholic sacred calendar.<sup>55</sup> Much disapproval was expressed at the existence of practices such as the performance of ceremonial ablutions to remove the pollution caused by birth, death and other life-crisis events. The Synod also condemned Syrian priests for casting horoscopes in the Hindu manner, for using 'pagan' techniques of exorcism, divination and dream interpretation and for dispensing dust from Syrian cult shrines for use as a miraculous healing agent. All of these practices were still widespread at least into the early decades of this century; in most cases the decrees simply called on the Syrians to Christianise the form of their rites and invocations, rather than abandoning them altogether.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. *CM Record* 2:5 (1831), p. 119. On the text of the Synod's decrees, see above, p. 251, n. 19.

<sup>55</sup> Synod, VIII:ix, pp. 647-9.

<sup>56</sup> For example, the Synod banned the use of 'pagan' incantations in ceremonies of exorcism, but upheld the belief in possession by demons as an essential element of Catholic doctrine. Synod VII:ix, p. 620; VIII:xxii, p. 657. The decrees were much concerned with the use and powers of miraculous sacred substances: again the debate concerned matters of detail rather than fundamental perceptions. Instead of using sacred tomb dust in the preparation of holy water, sacred salt was to be applied, and only ordained priests were to carry the sacred muron or holy oil. This had much in common with the Hindu notion of limiting access to sacred objects to persons in a suitably pure ritual state. It was ruled that the miracle of transubstantiation could not occur in communion wine which had soured or turned to vinegar; instead of using water pressed from dried dates or raisins, as was customary, proper muscatel was to be imported from Portugal, and a priest with a suitably discerning palate was to be appointed to test the wine for spoilage.

The Synod also declared that while the St Thomas Christians were to abstain from ritual ablutions and other un-Christian acts they might still continue to observe the region's all-important code of touch and distance pollution. The idea here was that once the Syrians had been made into orthodox conforming Christians it would be safe for them to pay lip-service to the 'pagan' observances which allowed them to retain their high rank and privileges in Malayali society. It was to the Padroado's advantage for their favoured client group to preserve their power and prestige among the region's caste Hindus. This was why there was never any question of forcing the Syrians to drop their separate Syriac liturgy: the Latin rite was for low-status Mukkuva fishermen and other recent converts, and the Syrians were never to be required to share their churches with persons of inferior rank.

### Archdeacons and local rulers

For all the vehemence of these attacks, the Jesuits succeeded in sustaining this ambivalent relationship with the St Thomas Christians until 1652, when the Portuguese authorities brought about (or were believed to have brought about) the death of yet another west Asian bishop who had arrived in India with credentials from the Nestorian Catholicos. The horror of this act – the shedding of blood which had been imbued with the sacred authority of the Catholicate – provoked a mass renunciation of the Syrians' ties with Rome.<sup>57</sup> The martyred cleric Mar Ahatallah was immediately added to the pantheon of miracle-working Syrian tutelaries, and the head of the Pakalamarram lineage was brought to the fore once again. A gathering of katanars (Syrian priests) laid hands on him while touching one of the group's most potent miracle-working stone crosses, the Koonen cross at Mattanceri. This physical contact with the power of a famous Keralan cult object was held to have endowed the priests with the power of consecration, and they declared the Pakalmarram cleric *metran* or chief Syrian prelate with the title Mar Thoma I.<sup>58</sup>

What the Syrians really wanted, though, was to regularise their links to the great overseas Christian centres, since these were the source of the church's sacred validating power. Thus appeals for bishops were sent to every church primate in west Asia. In this situation niceties of doctrine and denomination were much less important than the primates' power to

<sup>57</sup> E.R. Hambye, 'An eastern prelate in India. Mar Aithalaha 1652–53', *ICHR* 2:1 (1968), pp. 1–5; Mackenzie, 'History of Christianity', pp. 75–6, note 64.

<sup>58</sup> Papers of the Rev. Dr W.S. Mill, MS 'Journal of a Tour in India 1821–1822', entry for 1 Dec. 1821/MS Mill 204/fo. 25v/Bodleian; Brown, *Indian Christians*, p. 101.

endorse priests and bishops and reconstitute the chain of sacred authority which gave the group its identity.<sup>59</sup> As it happened it was the Patriarch of Antioch who finally responded: in 1665 the 'rebel' St Thomas Christians received a new prelate with credentials from the west Syrian or Jacobite primate. In the end about two-thirds of the Syrian churches went back to Roman Catholic authority; the rest proclaimed allegiance to the 'Jacobite' church of Antioch.<sup>60</sup>

Thus although the Syrians had always possessed an unstable system of church leadership, it was this collision with the Portuguese which created a lasting cleavage between Roman Catholic Syrians owing allegiance to European missionary bishops, and those known as 'Jacobites' or 'Orthodox' Syrians who recognised the authority of the hereditary Pakalamarram metrans. After the so-called revolt of the Koonen cross, the St Thomas Christian Syrians were left with a divided structure of authority which was to generate dissension and violence for the next 200 years. In the short term the group did not suffer any loss of status or prestige in Malayali society. It was now all the more necessary for them to rely on Keralan Hindu rajas to constitute and endorse their church leaders, and between 1665 and 1729 the recognition provided by these rulers greatly enhanced the authority of the Pakalamarram metrans.<sup>61</sup>

The rise of Kerala's eighteenth-century warrior ruler Martanda Varma confirmed these links between Malayali rulers and the Syrians' king-like chief clerics. Martanda Varma and his successor Rama Varma threw the whole weight of their new war-states behind the Syrian metrans, and under these rulers the ceremonies of recognition for each new prelate were performed as acts of incorporation just like those which extended the ruler's endorsement to the heads of Hindu caste groups and specialised occupational communities.<sup>62</sup> The Syrians' eagerness to

<sup>59</sup> T.K. Velu Pillai, *The Travancore State Manual* (4 vols., Trivandrum, 1940) I, pp. 694–5; Brown, *Indian Christians*, pp. 96–7; 'Copy of a Correspondence Relative to the Syrian Christians in Travancore', 13 Mar. 1822/MS Mill 192/fo. 133v/Bodleian.

<sup>60</sup> After the Koonen 'revolt' the Syrians' Jesuit missionaries were replaced with Italian Carmelites under the authority of the Congregation of the *Propaganda Fide*. This body was founded in 1622 as a means of depriving the Portuguese of their monopoly of overseas missionary activities. From 1673 the headquarters of these Propaganda missionaries was at 'Verapoly' (Verapuzha) near Cochin; the Jesuit Padroado maintained rival ecclesiastical centres at Cochin and Cranganur (later Ambalakada). The creation of these competing church centres (and the wider Propaganda-Padroado conflict which lay behind these moves) became an additional source of unrest amongst the Syrians. Boxer, *Portuguese Seaborne Empire*, pp. 235–6; Mackenzie, 'History of Christianity', pp. 188, 191–5.

<sup>61</sup> Nieuhoff, *Voyages and Travels*, in Churchill, *Voyages*, II, pp. 258–60; Vincenzo Maria di S. Caterina da Siena, *Il Viaggio all'Indie* (Venetia, 1678), p. 152.

<sup>62</sup> Placid Podipara, *The Malabar Christians* (Alleppey, 1972), p. 34; Velu Pillai, *Travancore Manual*, II, p. 346.

acquire new overseas prelates proved to be another means by which the Travancore rajas could exercise their powers of kingly patronage among the St Thomas Christians. This was because once they reached India, all west Asian bishops could throw the Syrian communities into turmoil by building on the exultation which greeted their arrival, and then seeking to impose their authority on the churches and their incomes. Only a king could restore order in these situations.

New prelates arrived with increasing regularity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Six prelates reached the region between 1676 and 1708, and by the 1750s there were at least four overseas prelates in Malabar at the same time, all vying for supremacy over the Syrians' churches and all backing rival claimants for the metranship. The influx continued until well into the nineteenth-century; in the final stage of the saga the Jacobite Patriarch himself decided to make an appearance in this ecclesiastical battleground.<sup>63</sup> Many of these incoming clerics came to be revered as miracle-working cult personalities in the tradition of Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh and the other great legendary hero-bishops of the past. Thus it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the region received many of its most celebrated Christian cult saints. These include the seventeenth-century martyr prelate Mar Ahatallah and also the eighteenth-century bishop saints Mar Gabriel (d. 1731), Mar Gregorios (d. 1773), Mar Basilius (d. 1794), Mar Ivanios (d. 1794) and his companion the *ramban* (monk) Philipos.<sup>64</sup>

In 1751 there were fierce conflicts after the metran broke off relations with all four of the prelates who were then touring the Syrian churches; this was a particularly demanding set of would-be primates and tithe-takers. When the metran defied their claims the foreigners' leader led a tomb-smashing raid at one of Travancore's holiest Syrian cult shrines, the Mar Gabriel tomb at Kottayam.<sup>65</sup> The aim of these attacks was to rupture the chain of succession which secured the metran's authority: if the tombs were damaged or destroyed the Malayali metran would lose a key source of his power. Although these desecrations provoked furious outbreaks amongst the Syrians, the Keralan rajas were in a position to step in and adjudicate for the group before there was a complete breakdown in the system of priestly authority. This is just what a south Indian ruler was

<sup>63</sup> Mackenzie, 'History of Christianity', pp. 190, 203; P. Cheriyan, *The Malabar Syrians and the Church Missionary Society* (Kottayam, 1935), pp. 32–3; Brown, *Indian Christians*, p. 151.

<sup>64</sup> C. Swanston to T. Robinson, chaplain to Bp. of Calcutta, 15 Sept. 1826/MS Mill 191/fo. 13v/Bodleian.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*; Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, pp. 225–32; Mackenzie, 'History of Christianity', pp. 208–9.

expected to do in the case of an 'honours' dispute or any other conflict which endangered the stability of a Hindu temple or other corporate institution. Here too Martanda Varma employed his kingly powers of adjudication to impose a settlement on the contending parties, and the metran was forced to acknowledge the supremacy of the overseas prelates.<sup>66</sup>

In the end this intervention actually strengthened the position of the Pakalamarram metrans. In 1772 the foreign prelates marked their reconciliation with the metran by performing a rite of formal consecration in which the Malayali metran received the new title of Mar Dionysius I. The stature of the Pakalamarrams was much enhanced by this act since it renewed and strengthened their contact with the sacred validating power of the Patriarchate.<sup>67</sup> At the same time these moves showed that the Syrians were now dependent upon the Hindu kingdom of Travancore to resolve the chronic instabilities of their church leadership. For the time being the rajas' acts of mediation gave the Syrians a measure of stability which they were unable to generate through their system of internal office-holding. But while this reshaping of corporate institutions worked to the Syrians' advantage during the eighteenth century, the old conflicts resurfaced all the more violently after 1810 when the British upset the delicate bonds between church leadership and the state and left the group searching ever more desperately for sources of mediation and authority.

There are unmistakable parallels between the Syrians' Christian cult traditions and the cults of the region's Muslim pirs. In both cases the focus of worship and veneration is the power of the groups' miraculously endowed tomb shrines. Like the Muslim urs or kanturi, the Syrians' cattam festivals commemorate the death anniversary of the prelate-saint: after his death his endowment of sacred power or energy is held to reside within the tomb. Furthermore, among the Syrians the authority of the hereditary Malayali archdeacons, known as metrans (Metropolitans) after 1652, depended upon control of these sacred grave sites. During the nineteenth century rival contenders for this office staged tomb-smashing raids which were intended to rupture their enemies' chain of spiritual succession and thus deprive them of their power. This was much like the tradition of authority which came to be focused on Sufi dargahs. Like the Syrian cult saint, the Muslim pir transmits his authority to the shrine when he dies, and in both cases this power is passed on to the original saint's heirs or successors.

There is a further parallel with the Muslim devotional tradition: as in

<sup>66</sup> Mackenzie, *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

the legends of the great south Asian Sufis, the Christian founder-saints are all said to have led their disciples on a perilous voyage from some foreign homeland. These tales of ordeals and testing journeys are often linked to accounts of deliverance and rescue. These have much in common with the key episodes of the region's Sufi biographical texts, and at the end of the Christian founder-saint's testing ordeal there is the same moment of triumph and spiritual conquest. In addition, it has already been seen that the Muslim cult texts often express this moment of spiritual triumph in explicitly martial terms. This too is a feature of the Syrians' cult legends. The St Thomas Christians' cult saints are often visualised as leaders of armies, and in a sense they too are precursor kings like the martial Sufis described in chapter 5.

It is true that the Syrians' saints and hero-bishops are the precursors of living Christian prelates rather than sovereign rulers. At the same time they are still seen as having established a domain. This domain was commanded and endowed with its power by the hereditary archdeacons and metrans (chief Jacobite prelates) who claimed to have been chosen for the priesthood by St Thomas himself, and who sought to assert their authority over the Syrians throughout the pre-colonial and colonial periods. The power of these élite church notables came to be perceived as a form of sovereignty, and this was much like the sovereign power which was held to be vested in south India's Sufi cult saints. Thus in a sense, the Pakalamarram archdeacons came to be perceived as the equivalent of a line of south Indian 'little kings'. This term is usually applied to the petty warrior chiefs of the poligar country; in the next chapter the idea of 'little kingship' will be applied to the line of élite caste notables who claimed hereditary rights of sovereignty over the maritime Tamil Parava population. Like these Parava caste notables, the Syrian archdeacons became figures of authority within an increasingly stratified and hierarchical social system. Both lines of 'little kings' derived their power from an hereditary connection to the group's chief tutelary cult figure, and from their control over the group's great churches and tomb shrines.

### **Syrians in the eighteenth-century Keralan kingdoms**

Although the St Thomas shrine complex at Mylapore was built up and popularised by the Portuguese, and although large numbers of Syrians became affiliates of the Roman Catholic church hierarchy, the group and its culture were far from being passive by-products of western mission-building. Within their home territories in Malabar, the St Thomas Christians were influenced far less by the Portuguese Padroado than by local rulers and the Hindu religious culture which they supported.

During the eighteenth century when the rajas of Travancore and Cochin were transforming the region's loosely structured chiefdoms into powerful warrior kingdoms, the Syrians maintained and even expanded their privileged role in Hindu society. Their military skills and bearing impressed a wide range of European observers in this period. One of Haidar Ali's French mercenary commanders described a typical band of Syrian warriors:

The deputies [of the Syrian Christians] who came to Coilmatour were stout men, with a ferocious air and manner. They had the figure of a small cross above their nose punctured in the skin, and a large scar on the right cheek caused by the recoil of their musquets.<sup>68</sup>

With their stockpiles of weapons and their ties to the old kalari networks of martial training and preceptorship, the Syrian land-holding and warrior lineages were much sought after as the rajas of Travancore and Cochin began to build up their new armies. These eighteenth-century rulers drew their military men and other specialist service people from a wide range of communities and ethnic groups. The two regimes were able to recruit and incorporate Tamil Brahman ritualists, Konkani traders, Deccani and Pathan Muslim soldiers and even warrior clansmen from the Tamil poligar country, and so there is nothing exceptional about their success in assimilating high-ranking Malayali Christian warriors as well.<sup>69</sup> The powerful Syrian Catholic families of north and central Travancore were especially prominent in Martanda Varma's new war-state. For generations the Malittas of Mavelikkara treasured an elaborate gold circlet which raja Martanda Varma is said to have bestowed on their famous ancestor the panikkar Mathai Malitta as a token of honour and affiliation.<sup>70</sup>

Raja Martanda Varma of Travancore recruited several thousand Syrians during his conquests in north Travancore. By the middle of the century his massive European-style army was said to contain at least one

<sup>68</sup> NMDLT, *History of Ayder Ali Khan*, I, p. 171.

<sup>69</sup> Paolino, *Voyage*, p. 173; Velu Pillai, *Travancore Manual*, II, pp. 383–417; Cheriyan, *Malabar Syrians*, p. 32; Ibrahim Kunju, *Rise of Travancore*, pp. 121–2; Shungoony Menon, *History of Travancore*, I, pp. 151, 165; Panikkar, *History of Kerala 1498–1801*, p. 234.

<sup>70</sup> The Malittas say that they received this royal token in the 1740s as a reward for having sheltered the raja after a military defeat. Other Syrian families also claim to have acted as protectors of Keralan Hindu kings. (The Malittas are supposed to have gained their title of panikkar when one of their ancestors saved a mediaeval 'Perumal' ruler from an attacking wild buffalo; this is comparable to the heroic claims made by the Pudukkottai Tondaimans. See above, p. 62n.) Interviews Trivandrum and Kottayam 1977; and see Margaret Gibbons, *Mar Ivanios 1882–1953: Archbishop of Trivandrum* (Dublin, 1962), p. 1.

corps consisting wholly of St Thomas Christians. One of the successes of the Keralan regimes was their ability to link the ancient tradition of the panikkars (warrior preceptor lineages) and the kalari martial training foundations to the new military system with its European mercenary officers and its use of modern weaponry. Many of the old kalari gymnasia became centres of training in European-style drill and artillery techniques, thus allowing the rulers to merge the prestige of the old martial cult tradition with the institutions of their new dynastic war-state.<sup>71</sup> The major Christian kalari centres played a key role in this process. The most important of the European military men who were recruited to train the Travancore armies was a Belgian named Eustace de Lannoy. This mercenary officer taught steel forging, swordsmanship and gunnery at the kalari of the Mavelikkara Malittas; a collection of weapons which were constructed under his supervision was handed down within the family for many generations after the death of Martanda Varma's protégé Mathai Malitta.<sup>72</sup>

At the same time the state trading monopolies depended very largely on the skills of experienced Syrian commercial men. Syrians based in key market towns such as Kanjirapalli, Mavelikkara and Shertallai played a major role in assembling pepper and other forest commodities and moving them through the various stages of the monopoly export system. While many Jacobite Syrians were drawn into the new commercial system, the success of St Thomas Christian brokers and traders in this period is best exemplified by the fortunes of another Syrian Catholic family, the Parayil Tharakons of Shertallai. Tachil Matthu Tharakon took control of Travancore's salt and tobacco monopolies during the reign of raja Martanda Varma. By the end of the eighteenth century the Tharakons' web of commercial interests had spread throughout the state and Matthu was recognised as the richest and most powerful man in Travancore, an intimate of the royal household and close advisor to the raja and his chief revenue official, the *dewan*.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Cheriyan, *Malabar Syrians*, p. 32; Shungoony Menon, *History of Travancore*, I, p. 151; S. Ramanath Aiyar, *A History of Travancore* (Madras, 1938), p. 42; A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History* (Kottayam, 1967), p. 282; Sreedhara Menon, ed., *Kerala District Gazetteers. Kottayam*, p. 123.

<sup>72</sup> Interviews, Trivandrum and Kottayam, Sept. 1977; and see Cheriyan, *Malabar Syrians*, p. 32 and Gibbs, *Mar Ivanios*, pp. 1–3; Orme, *Indostan*, I, p. 400.

<sup>73</sup> Das Gupta, *Malabar in Asian Trade*, p. 41; Sreedhara Menon, *Kottayam*, p. 510; Paolino, *Voyage*, pp. 117–21. On Syrian officeholding families see e.g. journal entry 8 Dec. 1821, MS Mill 204/fo. 30r/Bodleian. Information on Mathu Tharakon from interviews, Trivandrum, Sept. 1977; Cover File 726/1888, TGER/TSA; *Proceedings of the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly* (4 vols., Trivandrum, 1904–8), I:1904, p. 24.

The great Syrian lineages of Kerala were accorded shares in many of the state rituals which were inaugurated by these eighteenth-century rulers. In Cochin, where leading St Thomas Christian families were given royal land grants, and settled in fast growing commercial towns such as Trichur and Tripunittura, Syrian prelates participated in the rajas' installation ceremonies. During the Cochin Onam festivals, part of the regalia used in the rites came from a store of sacred objects housed in a Cochin Syrian church, and the processional image of the Hindu god Krishna which was paraded in the festival was given a ceremonial halt at the house of a prominent Syrian donor.<sup>74</sup> In this period the Syrians' high status in Hindu society continued to be reflected in their rights of access to Hindu shrines and 'sacred space'. They were still identified as a ritually pure population, and neither their shrines nor their persons were regarded as polluting to caste Hindus.

These signs of Syrian 'integration' were not confined to the region's old established localities. In Alleppey, one of the many new urban centres which were founded by the eighteenth-century rajas, a Hindu temple and a Syrian church were built on adjoining sites, just as in older centres founded before the unification of Travancore. The old reciprocity under which Syrians and caste Hindus took part in one another's festival celebrations continued to prevail and even took on new depth and elaboration in some areas. At the important Siva temple at Ambalapuzha in north Travancore, Syrian donors held shares in the god's festivals throughout the eighteenth century. During the 1780s, the spectacle of Christian notables making their offerings during the temple's 'diabolical nocturnal orgies' outraged the Catholic missionary Fra Paolino.<sup>75</sup>

This Italian Carmelite was the first in a long line of Europeans to misunderstand the significance of these privileges. He thought that Christians were being forced to take part in Hindu rites by 'oppressive' Hindu officials, and although his appeals to have the Syrians relieved of their supposed 'disabilities' had no effect at the time, they were forerunners of campaigns which were undertaken by more influential nineteenth-century missionaries.<sup>76</sup>

In the eighteenth century, caste Hindus and Syrian families held joint

<sup>74</sup> This festival celebrates the legendary visit to Kerala of the mythical hero-king Mahabali; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it featured mock battles and displays of martial skill. L.A. Krishna Iyer, *Social History of Kerala* (2 vols., Madras, 1970), II, pp. 123–5; A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Social and Cultural History of Kerala* (New Delhi, 1979), p. 169. And see Menon, *Cochin Manual*, p. 126; Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, I, p. 470.

<sup>75</sup> Paolino, *Voyage*, pp. 119–120; *Proceedings of the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly* III, p. 132.

<sup>76</sup> Paolino, *Voyage*, pp. 119–20.

shares in local goddess festivals and other Hindu temple rites across much of central and southern Kerala. Syrians also had the right to take their commemorative cattam festival processions along the same routes used by Hindu temple festivals and through urban residential quarters inhabited by Nayers and other high-ranking Hindus. The right of access to such prestigious procession routes was a particularly important status marker in south Indian society; many of the region's most hotly contested religious 'honours disputes' were fought out over just these tokens of caste rank and precedence (see below, pp. 369–78, 422–52). In this period Hindu Nayers were known to attend Syrian cattam festivals, and they also made offerings at the tombs of the group's deceased prelates and holy men.<sup>77</sup> These privileges and reciprocal religious ties were the most critical test of the Syrians' standing within the Keralan kingdoms. While they survived, the St Thomas Christians could be considered the equivalent of a high Hindu caste group analogous to the upper Nayar subdivisions and linked closely to these Nayar groups in social and religious life. When Nayers and other high-ranking Malayalis began to challenge the place of the Syrians in this Hindu culture at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the group soon ceased to be part of a shared social and ritual system, and, as the next chapter will show, the long-standing pattern of 'integration' gave way to rapid and irreversible disintegration.

### **Christian cult worship in the Malabar region**

Before moving on to this period of conflict in the nineteenth century, it is necessary to ask how the Syrians' religious life had developed within the setting of Malayali Hindu culture.<sup>78</sup> In describing the Mylapore shrine it was suggested that many south Indian worshippers had come to identify the figure of St Thomas both with the worship of the Hindu god Murukan-Subrahmanya, and also with the veneration of powerful Tamil Muslim cult saints. In the Malabar country too there was a widespread intermingling of Christian cult beliefs with Hindu and Muslim devotional traditions. The most striking feature of the St Thomas cult in Kerala was its close relationship to the martial cult traditions which played such a prominent part in both Muslim and Hindu worship in the region.

For Malayali Hindus the warrior goddess Bhagavati occupied a position much like that of the fierce female warrior deities of Tamilnad.

<sup>77</sup> *CM Record* 1831, p. 118; 1841, p. 121; 1848 pp. 206–7; 1853, p. 217; Thurston *Castes and Tribes*, VI, p. 445; Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, p. 250.

<sup>78</sup> As elsewhere, 'Hindu' is used here for those who had come to identify themselves with the religious traditions which we now call Hindu.

Bhagavati too is a figure who engages in titanic warfare against demonic forces, and in Kerala this deity was worshipped as the tutelary divinity or kulatevam of many élite Nayar land-holding lineages. At the great Bhagavati shrines of Kerala the goddess's victories over the demons or asuras were commemorated in spectacular festivals at which the leading Nayar clans of the locality acted as chief 'donors' and celebrants. During these rites the head of the local panikkar lineage would often lead his disciples in mass displays of stick-fighting and other military exercises. At some goddess shrines the divine warrior was represented by a sword garlanded with blood-red blossoms. There were mass sacrifices of cocks and goats at Bhagavati festivals as well as trance dancing by elaborately masked and costumed male performers representing the demonic armies who engage with the goddess. As in other parts of south India the goddess is both the agent and the lifter of disease, and she was also worshipped as a reigning sovereign. At the climax of these festivals it was customary to mount the goddess on an elephant in token of her royal status: she was then conveyed in triumph from the battlefield and installed once more inside her temple.<sup>79</sup>

It has already been noted that the Syrians' church festivals had many features in common with these Keralan goddess festivals, most notably in the mass cock sacrifices carried out at a number of major Christian cattams. The St Thomas cult contains the closest of these parallels, though. By the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century the apostle had actually been absorbed into the sacred pantheon at many Keralan Hindu temples. At Ambalapuzha, the locality where Syrian donors held shares in the locality's Siva festivals, the image of St Thomas was carried in procession with those of the temple's Hindu deities.<sup>80</sup>

Furthermore, as they are recounted in Kerala the St Thomas legends have portrayed the apostle as a figure endowed with the same awesome characteristics as the Malayali warrior goddess. St Thomas too has power over disease and other bodily afflictions, and for many centuries both the saint and his cult objects were believed to possess the power to maim and destroy. In at least one legend St Thomas defeats a would-be temptress by turning her to stone. The account has a marked similarity to the story of the Trichy Khawjamalai pir: like this fierce avenging cult saint the apostle has come to be regarded as a figure of vengeance and all-devouring wrath much like the goddess herself.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Anantha Krishna Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, I, p. 238; II, pp. 71–6; F. Fawcett, 'The Nayars of Malabar', *Madras Govt. Museum Bulletin*, 3:3 (1901), pp. 186–291.

<sup>80</sup> Sreedhara Menon, *Kerala District Gazetteers. Ernakulam*, p. 299; Hunt, *The Anglican Church in Travancore and Cochin I*, p. 142 (note).

<sup>81</sup> T.K. Joseph, 'A St. Thomas legend', *The Indian Antiquary* 58 (1929), pp. 178–9.

These potentially destructive energies were also held to reside in the apostle's cult objects: the power which comes to be vested in stone crosses, statues, relics and other sacred items is one of the most notable features of south Indian Christian religious culture. The bleeding cross of Mylapore is one of many such cult items. Its outpourings of blood are associated with forces which can be wild and destructive as well as beneficent. In Kerala too cult objects like the Koonen cross at Mattancerry were widely perceived as repositories of power (see above, p. 268). In the Syrian church centre of Tiruvella, European missionaries reported that the threat of cholera brought out the local St Thomas Christians who marched in procession bearing a potent local cross and fired off guns to drive away the disease. When the Padroado missionaries introduced images of the Virgin Mary into Kerala in the sixteenth century, these too became a focus for cult veneration among the Syrians. At Mavelikkara, a celebrated image of the Virgin was paraded with music and banners during the church's annual festival: the priests and 'chief men of the church' carried the image in procession and halted at pandals (canopied ceremonial enclosures) before each house where cash offerings were made.<sup>82</sup>

Kerala's best known miraculous cross, the cross at Cranganur, is a cult object with close ties to the St Thomas tradition. Here too the cult traditions refer to fearful and uncontrollable energies. In the sixteenth century devotees said that the apostle's blazing lustre made it emanate 'a splendour so brilliant that it blinded those who looked upon it'. St Thomas himself appears in these legends as an image of transcendent power, enthroned, ascendant, even flaming in majesty. There are several cult legends which describe the apostle praying serenely while a great fire rages all round him, and in some Malayali cult traditions the apostle is flayed alive and then rises up uninjured.<sup>83</sup>

Again, these accounts invite comparison with the cult legends of south Indian pirs. The legends and tazkira accounts of Baba Fakiruddin and Shahul Hamid of Nagur have many points in common with these accounts of the saint being flayed and consumed in flames and then returning in triumph to annihilate his enemies. But in the Malabar country it was the

<sup>82</sup> This is much like the saint-cult festivals which were instituted in Tamil Catholic centres. See below, pp. 343–4. *CM Record* 1841, p. 121; 1850, p. 269. The martial features of the Tiruvella healing rite invite comparison with the tradition of the Karaikkal warrior pir who rides out to drive away the cholera. One of Kerala's nineteenth century west Asian clerics cured devotees with the bone of a Christian saint. See Hunt, *The Anglican Church in Travancore and Cochin*, I, p. 145.

<sup>83</sup> Gouvea, *Histoire*, pp. 264–5; Anantakrishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, p. 6; interviews Kottayam, Cochin Sept. 1977.

connection between St Thomas and the Keralan warrior goddesses which was made most explicit in the region's devotional texts and legends. This overlapping of cult traditions emerges with particular clarity at Cranganur. This ancient trading town is the site of one of the most celebrated Bhagavati temples in Kerala. It also has great importance in the Syrians' sacred geography as the site of St Thomas's first landing in India. For many centuries the region's Muslims, Christians and Hindus have possessed a rich and mutually invigorating stock of shared beliefs and religious observances. During the 1920s a legend was recorded at the Cranganur Bhagavati shrine which was almost certainly known to local Hindus and Christians during earlier centuries; there is a similar account in a manuscript which is thought to date from the eighteenth century.<sup>84</sup> According to the version which was transcribed in the 1920s, St Thomas and the goddess once staged a debate on the merits of Hinduism and Christianity.

The arguments became warm, and Bhagavathi, considering it best to cease further discussions, decamped, and jumping across the Cranganore river, made straight for the pagoda [temple]. St Thomas, not to be undone, gave chase, and just as the deity got inside the door, the saint reached its outside, and, setting his foot between it and the door-post prevented its closure; there they both stood until the door turned to stone.<sup>85</sup>

This is a particularly engaging example of the many legends which recount cosmic battles between rival saints and divinities: goddesses battling with demon asuras, Hindu gurus fighting Muslim pirs and so on. Here too as in the case of the south's Muslim pir legends, these myths are not to be taken as signs of confrontation and enmity between religious communities, Hindus against Muslims, Christians against Hindus. Instead this particular tradition gives St Thomas a clear and honoured place within the temple's stalapurana myths. Bhagavati and the apostle debate and clash as equals, both divine, both imbued with sacred authority. At the end of the chase St Thomas does not penetrate all the way into the temple's inner sanctum, but he is allowed quite a significant foothold within its precincts. There is no real antagonism implicit in this battle story: the chase scene is rather playful, and, incongruous as it may sound in a St Thomas legend, there may even be a hint of sexual frolic like that of the Krishna cult stories or the accounts of the marriages of Hindu gods and goddesses. Certainly the element of conflict is much less intense than

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Anantha Krishna Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, I, p. 239, and see Joseph, 'A St. Thomas legend'.

<sup>85</sup> Anantha Krishna Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, I, p. 239.

in the stories of Bhagavati's titanic battles against her demon enemy. The conclusion, with St Thomas forever guaranteed his toe-hold inside the temple, seems an apt expression of the Syrians' place in the Keralan Hindu moral order – 'integrated', accepted, as closely bound up with Hindu religious and social life as they could be without losing their Christian identity altogether.<sup>86</sup>

Thus St Thomas has played a complex role in the Syrians' religious culture. He is the group's special guardian and patron, and so provides a focus for their identity as an élite and distinctive population within the wider society of the Malabar coast. But while the cult helped to delineate this shared identity and has distinguished the Syrians from lower-ranking Malayali caste groups and communities, its texts and legends and the style of worship which was followed at the apostle's shrines and holy places created explicit links to the Keralan warrior goddess tradition. Furthermore the St Thomas cult had many features in common with the Muslim pir traditions of Malabar, Tamilnad and the Deccan. Up to the nineteenth century these features of the Syrians' religious life served to 'integrate' and link the group with the region's other powerful arms-bearing and landholding communities. In Travancore and Cochin this meant that they possessed the sort of tutelary cult figure whose power and prestige gave them entrée to the world of the élite upper Nayar populations.

<sup>86</sup> In the Malayalam palm-leaf manuscript which is thought to date from the eighteenth-century, the Cranganur legend resembles the Muslim legends of the Khawjamalai pirs, and also the legends of the Nagur and Penukonda saints. Instead of the playfully flirtatious St Thomas, the saint appears as a ferocious, vengeful misogynist. An untouchable Pulaya woman accosts St Thomas 'with beguiling words, after the manner of women' and the apostle turns her into the stone image which became the main object of worship in the Cranganur temple. Joseph, 'A St Thomas legend', pp. 178–9.

## *The collapse of Syrian Christian 'integration'*

During the nineteenth century the St Thomas Christians lost their role as privileged warriors and office-holders within the Hindu states of Malabar. Their problems of internal leadership worsened, and to make matters worse, the Syrians were badly hit by a disruption in the bonds of shared ceremonial which had linked them to the region's Hindu service and military groups. These changes began with the collapse of the political order which had been created by the region's eighteenth-century rajas. First came the humiliation of the Mysorean invasion in which the forces of Tipu Sultan reduced Cochin to a tributary client state and overran the keystone of Martanda Varma's defence system, the chain of fortifications known as the Aramboli lines. In 1795 the rajas of Travancore and Cochin entered into tributary alliances with the English East Indian Company. As in so many other Indian kingdoms, this meant that the Company agreed to underwrite the states' military security but at such a high price that they were soon reduced to the status of impecunious client regimes.

The first British Resident was appointed to the two courts in 1800, and this was followed by a rapid disintegration in the states' military organisation and in the system of ceremonial office and ritual which had secured it. Both rulers were forced to cut military expenditure so as to meet their ever-growing arrears of tribute, and these measures provoked armed risings of the Travancore and Cochin armies in 1804 and again in 1808.<sup>1</sup> After putting down the second of these outbreaks the British forced the two states to disband their armies. Like the nawabs of Arcot the two Keralan rulers retained their courts, their tradition of religious patronage and their command of shrines and holy places. Unlike Arcot though, Travancore and Cochin were still active military powers until the end of the eighteenth century, and there had been a particularly close link between the strength of the two armies and the dynamism of the states' political systems. As a result of this forced disbandment, the kalari

<sup>1</sup> BOR vol. 3569: 17 Jan. 1809, pp. 36–9; 5 Feb. 1809, pp. 80–2; 13 Feb. 1809, pp. 149–51/TNA. See also Report on East India Company's Connections with Travancore, 29 Sept. 1809/BC 166/882/IOL; Velu Pillai, *Manual*, II, 446, 458; Sreedhara Menon, *Ernakulam*, p. 199.

gymnasia were dissolved, the panikkars lost their function as preceptors and gurus to their trainee-disciples, and there was a dramatic loss of livelihood for the states' military men, together with the artisans, retainers and other specialist groups who had serviced and supplied them. This sudden collapse of the Malabar military system produced the same sort of social dislocation which was beginning to occur in much of north India at this time. Here, too, roaming ex-soldiers took to plunder and brigandage, and the collapse of military spending-power brought distress to the region's market towns and artisan production centres.<sup>2</sup>

The European travellers who visited Travancore and Cochin at this time all thought that what they were observing was the rule of torpid and inflexible oriental despotisms. The state monopolies were supposed to have strangled trade and commerce in the region, and because the Keralan rajas were known to have been great patrons of Hindu religious institutions, it was assumed that their drive for revenue income had made them 'rapacious' and 'oppressive' in their treatment of their indigenous Christian populations. The Syrians received lurid treatment in these accounts, particularly in works produced by the era's new breed of travelling Protestant evangelicals. These publicists were determined to alert the British public to the supposed plight of these 'lost' fellow believers, whom they portrayed as victims of a 'dark and cruel tyranny' under which 'fanatical and bigoted' rulers had reduced the Syrians to a state of shameful degradation. Such claims about the Syrians' 'poverty and spiritual depression' and the Syrians' 'air of fallen greatness' led neatly to the presumption that the Syrians were in need of rescue, regeneration and 'modernisation' at the hands of right-thinking British officials and missionary organisations.<sup>3</sup>

Most of this was sheer fantasy. There was nothing stagnant about the political and economic order of eighteenth-century Travancore and Cochin, and large numbers of St Thomas Christians had been honoured and rewarded for their role in the region's armies and in the state trading system which had financed them. What these travellers were really encountering was a sudden slowdown of growth and expansion in the

<sup>2</sup> Sreedhara Menon, *Ernakulam*, pp. 203, 540; [Thomas] Arthur, *Report on a Few Subjects Regarding the Countries of Travancore and Cochin*, in H. Drury, ed., *Selections from the Records of Travancore* (Trivandrum, 1860: first issued 1810), pp. 67–70; Arthur, *Report of the Countries of Travancore and Cochin, their Condition and Resources*, in *ibid.*, pp. 47–86; [Mackworth] *Diary*, p. 56; Madras Political Proceedings/2469/4 Jan. 1862/321/46/IOL. See Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen*, chs. 1, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur, *Report on a Few Subjects*, pp. 67–70; 'Mr. Wrede's Account of the Syrian Xtians' [sic] (n.d., 1820?) MS Mill 192/fo. 70v/Bodleian; Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, pp. 216, 240; F. Wrede, 'An Account of the St Thome Christians on the coast of Malabar', *Asiatick Researches*, 7 (1801), pp. 364–82; Claudius Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia* (Cambridge, 1811), p. 98.

region, rather than the torpor and repressiveness which European observers associated with the world of the oriental 'despot'. Even so, the Syrians did come under severe pressure from the 1790s onwards. This was partly a result of the rulers' quest for additional revenue to meet the new British tribute demands. There were disputes and protests about procurement prices within the state monopoly system and even a small-scale rebellion in south Travancore in 1799. This outbreak seems to have been directed in part at the Christian magnates and office-holders who were most closely associated with the running of the state's commodity monopolies. Writing at the beginning of this century, one local historian recorded a story claiming that Parayil Mathu Tharakon, intimate of the Travancore raja and the largest landholder in the state, was captured during this 1799 rising and forced to eat his own ear 'without benefit of salt or other seasoning' as a protest against his running of the Travancore salt monopoly. This anecdote may have been nothing more than wishful thinking on the part of the Parayils' enemies, but it shows how these new strains and tensions in Keralan society were beginning to mark out the Syrians as objects of a rather grisly form of suppressed hostility.<sup>4</sup>

Like the Nayar warrior groups, the Syrians were also hard hit by the loss of their privileged military role in the two states, and they were surprisingly quick to abandon the displays of martial skill and élan which had been noticed by so many foreign travellers. By 1818 it was possible for a British missionary with leanings towards muscular Christianity to complain that there was an 'absence of all manly exercises among the Syrians' and that they lived in 'ignorance of the uses of every weapon'.<sup>5</sup> In 1820 two British surveyors found that 'the [Syrians]' passiveness does not accord with the martial spirit they are said to have possessed but of which their character now exhibits few remains'.<sup>6</sup> In 1823 another traveller observed the pathetic remnants of the metran's famous caver honour guard. Where once the chief Jacobite prelate had been attended by a whole troop of fierce Syrian warriors, he now set out on ceremonial occasions with a few young boys who fired off his customary royal salute from a pair of ancient matchlocks.<sup>7</sup>

The Syrians were not the only one-time warrior group to lose prestige and income at this time. But since so many Syrian families were involved

<sup>4</sup> It is said that the raja consoled Mathu with the gift of a gold ear to replace the one he had lost. Philip, *The Indian Church of St Thomas*, p. 202.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Cheriyan, *Malabar Syrians*, p. 373.

<sup>6</sup> Ward and Conner, *Geographical and Statistical Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin States* (2 vols., Trivandrum, 1863-1901, 1st pub. 1827), I, p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, p. 245.

in commercial activity as well as military service, they were also affected by the shifts and dislocations which were occurring in the economy. These included a downturn in Malabar's seaborne commodity exports and the disruption of overland trade routes into the Tamil country. As a result, the group's place in Keralan society was being weakened on two fronts at this time, and it was this which set the scene for the breakdown in relations with the region's caste Hindus.<sup>8</sup>

A further sign of this change was a significant alteration in the group's caste lifestyle, that is in the set of customs and observances which defined them in relation to other communities and caste groups. This was apparently what James Forbes was describing in his *Oriental Memoirs*, published in 1813, when he declared, 'Many of the St Thome Christians now preserve the manners and mode of life of the brahmins as to cleanliness, and abstaining from animal food.'<sup>9</sup> Francis Buchanan also found signs of a shift to vegetarianism and a 'clean' Brahmanical lifestyle among the Syrians of Cochin, particularly among the katanars, who appeared to be leading this move to 'Brahmanise' the group's customs.<sup>10</sup>

It should be remembered that the Syrians possess two sets of claims linking them with high Hindu castes in Malabar. For many centuries they shared occupational and ritual rank with the upper Nayar caste groups, and they have also claimed descent from St Thomas's Nambutiri Brahman converts. What is not clear is whether the assertion of Nambutiri descent is a relatively recent innovation, though this may well be the case. With the region's warriors in disarray and its military culture discredited, the Syrians would have had considerable incentive to abandon some of the customs which they shared with Nayar and other warrior groups and to place new or heightened emphasis on their Brahman connections. This may be why ethnographies from the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries contain such inconsistent descriptions of Syrian rites and practices. These accounts link the Syrians with the upper Nayar groups, and yet they also describe periods of death, birth and menstrual pollution among the Syrians which are closer to Nambutiri customs than those of the Nayars.<sup>11</sup>

The Syrians were not alone in making these changes. The Roman Catholic Paravas, to be discussed in chapter 9, also purified some of their

<sup>8</sup> Arthur, *Report on a Few Subjects*, pp. 67–70; Arthur, *Report on the Countries*, pp. 47–86; Mackworth, *Diary*, p. 56; MPP 2469/4 Jan. 1862/46/IOL.

<sup>9</sup> (2 vols., London, 1813), I, p. 406.

<sup>10</sup> *Journey from Madras*, II, p. 391; and see Wrede, 'Account of the St Thome Christians', pp. 368–9.

<sup>11</sup> Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, VI, pp. 445–6, 450; Ananta Krishna Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, II, pp. 94–6; Anantakrishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, p. 102; Velu Pillai, *Manual*, IV, p. 812.

domestic life-cycle rites during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries so as to emphasise the power and status of their élite caste notables. Indeed all over India groups such as the Marathas and some of the ruling Jat clans were beginning to alter their meat-eating warrior customs, taking up vedic ritual and adopting a conspicuously ascetic Brahmanical lifestyle.<sup>12</sup> This too was part of the process of eighteenth-century state-building, and indeed Martanda Varma's new festivals and temple-building activities fit into this same pattern. But even though the sat-sudra rulers of Travancore and Cochin and some of the Nayers close to the court followed this 'Brahmanising' trend, these changes were not universal among the Keralan Nayers. Thus the Syrians' shift in lifestyle, possibly in imitation of the Keralan rulers who had become their most important patrons, also began to distance the group from the wider Nayar population with whom they had once had such close ties.

But if the Syrians' own shifts in behaviour and caste lifestyle helped to undermine their relationships with Hindus, other forces soon accelerated this breakdown. Here again the colonial state played a major role in these developments. Between 1810 and 1819 the British Resident in Travancore and Cochin was Colonel John Munro, a fervent evangelical Christian with all the familiar qualities of the early nineteenth-century reformer-official – boundless energy, rock-hard prejudices against 'heathenism', 'native superstition' and 'popery', and a fierce drive to reform and 'uplift' Indian society. Munro also had a taste for direct action in pursuit of these goals. His campaign to impose western standards of 'good government' in the two states was enlivened by his practice of personally flogging erring officials with his own cat-o'-nine-tails.<sup>13</sup>

Munro had close links with the more radical of the two Anglican proselytising organisations, the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Thus long before the evangelical officials of the Punjab deployed missionaries as agents of 'progressive' social reform, Munro had launched a bold scheme which placed Protestant missionaries in sensitive judicial and administrative posts in both states. The Resident's recruits from the CMS and the Nonconformist Protestant LMS (London Missionary Society) were only the beginnings of a missionary army which flooded into Travancore and Cochin throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and turned the Malabar coast into the most active missionary 'field' in India.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen*, pp. 208–9.

<sup>13</sup> Achyuta Menon, *Cochin State Manual* p. 150. Munro's views and aims emerge with great clarity from his correspondence with the Madras Corresponding Committee of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Box CI 2, CMSA.

<sup>14</sup> Munro to Madras Corresponding Secretary CMS, 3 Jan. 1816/Box CI 2/E 1 (1815–17)/CMSA.

Although these missionaries engaged in a wide range of educational and social reforming activities in the region, it was the Syrians, and in particular the non-Catholic or 'Jacobite' Syrians, who were the chief targets of Munro's scheme. Like the Portuguese and their allies in the Padroado, Munro hoped to transform the St Thomas Christians into a loyal client population. He too believed that this bond could be secured by making the Syrians share the same doctrines and style of worship as their European patrons. In this case, though, the new standard to be imposed was not that of post-Tridentine Catholicism, but the fervour, the iconoclasm and the fundamentalist enthusiasm of the early nineteenth-century Anglican evangelical revival.

It has already been seen that the Jesuits had made only very limited alterations in the St Thomas Christians' religious life. Indeed while they heightened the group's problems of leadership, the Padroado's contributions to Syrian faith and worship – the introduction of elaborate processional rites, the veneration of the Virgin and the use of cult images of the saints – tended to reinforce the practices which the Syrians had already shared with Malayali Hindus. In contrast, then, the shock of this encounter with a form of super-charged evangelical Protestantism had much more profound consequences for the St Thomas Christians. Beginning in the 1830s and 1840s many Syrians began to espouse the most radical of the new CMS teachings, smashing cult statues, abandoning cattam feasts and renouncing their ties to the west Asian patriarchs.<sup>15</sup>

In large part these shifts grew out of battles over church leadership which became progressively more violent and disruptive during the nineteenth century. The CMS doctrines provided a new set of weapons which could be used to advantage by Syrian factions seeking to unseat the current metran and seize control of important church centres. Ultimately, though, these events introduced a genuinely new tradition of worship into the group's religious culture. By the end of the nineteenth century the most conspicuous feature of Syrian society was a bewildering array of wildfire sects, breakaway churches and messianic Christian guru figures, and most of these groups and movements based their teachings on some form of radical evangelical Christianity. As of the 1880s the St Thomas Christians presented a picture of spectacular fragmentation and

<sup>15</sup> See Munro's letters 3 Jan. 1816, 6 Sept. 1817, 28 Aug. 1817; Rev. T. Norton to CMS Corresponding Secretary 14 Dec. 1816, Box CI 2/E1/CMSA. Also Mill journal 28 Dec. 1821 MS Mill 204/fo. 38v/Bodleian; and reports from the Rev. B. Bailey and others to CMS Corresponding Secretary Feb. 1835, MS vol. CMS 38, ICHA/UTC Bangalore; *CM Record* 1835, p. 222; 1838, p. 130; 1841, pp. 120–1; 1842, p. 158; *CM Intelligencer* 1856, pp. 221–2; Cheriyan, *Malabar Syrians*, p. 221.

conflict. There were fierce internal battles going on in nearly every Syrian locality; the old Catholic–Jacobite division had given way to as many as twelve or fourteen competing episcopal allegiances and confessional attachments, and, most seriously of all, St Thomas Christians were being shunned as ritually polluting by the region's caste Hindus. Where once they had been privileged participants in Hindu ritual, Syrians were now attacked and denounced for approaching urban temple precincts.

Naturally the British Resident Colonel Munro did not anticipate any of these developments when he launched his scheme to 'purify' and 'reform' the group's religious life. In 1816, however, following the death of the current 'Jacobite' metran, Munro took a step which was to have disastrous consequences for the Syrians. Instead of confirming the consecration of the dead prelate's heir, he transferred the office to a cleric from a priestly family based in Kunnankulam; this new metran was believed to be more sympathetic to the missionaries' policy of 'reform'.<sup>16</sup> This meant that at a stroke the Resident had overturned the whole Pakalamarram succession, not realising that once the eighteenth-century state system had collapsed, the prestige of these hereditary metrans had become the strongest stabilising force which the group still possessed.

Even this move might not have proved so disruptive if the new metran had had time to create a new tradition of authority and successorship for the group. But Munro's protégé died within weeks of his appointment, and the succession was interrupted even further by the deaths of the Resident's next three replacement prelates. Over the next few years the choice of metran disintegrated into a wild free-for-all with most of the leading Syrian families battling inconclusively for the post. In the end the claimants were reduced to drawing lots for the metranship. This undignified expedient left the winner with no inherited link to the west Asian patriarchate and no clear backing from the Resident or the Travancore rajas to sustain his authority. Indeed when another in the long line of west Asian bishops arrived in Kerala in 1825, the British authorities failed to enforce a settlement like the one which Martanda Varma had imposed at the time of the similar crisis in 1751. In this case the new overseas prelate Mar Athanasius anathematised the hapless metran and led his followers in an even more aggressive bout of tomb-smashing. These exploits reduced virtually every Syrian locality in Kerala to a state of embattled near-rebellion before the Resident finally stepped in and had Mar Athanasius deported.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Cheriyan, *Malabar Syrians*, pp. 60–1, 105–6.

<sup>17</sup> This prelate's sensational exploits are recorded in a correspondence in the MS vol. 'Papers Relating to Mar Athanasius'/MS Mill 191/Bodleian.

Dramatic as these developments were, they were not enough in themselves to cause a breakdown in the group's relationships with the Keralan Hindu population. The explanation for this lies in the potency of European misconceptions. As in their dealings with other supposedly 'oppressed' groups, British officials displayed an immense capacity to create problems where none had previously existed. They did this by throwing the whole weight of the colonial state into redressing a set of grievances that had only emerged in response to their own misperceptions. The non-existent problem in this case was the supposed oppression of Syrians by the states' Hindu office-holders. Following Buchanan's sad tales of Syrian penury and degradation, Munro began to inundate the group with state funds and state patronage in an attempt to 'rescue' and 'uplift' them from their 'melancholy state'. He believed that the tradition of priestly celibacy was a 'papist' custom which derived from their period of 'subjection' to Padroado church authority. Therefore, in keeping with the evangelical Protestant belief in the importance of a married clergy, he offered bounties of up to 500 rupees to any katanar who agreed to marry. Large sums were also allocated for the repair and reconstruction of Syrian churches.<sup>18</sup>

But it was the new style of advocacy which Munro devised for the Syrians which really began to alter their relations with caste Hindus. Munro was convinced that the states' Hindu revenue officials must be singling out Christians for particularly harsh exactions. Given the pressure on office-holders to increase revenue collections so as to meet the British tribute demand, there is no evidence to show that Christians in general or Syrians in particular were being treated more harshly than any other group. Indeed the St Thomas Christian magnates who dominated the region's remaining trading networks were well placed to reach an accommodation with state office-holders over the level of the local revenue demand. Nevertheless all these relationships were subject to great strain and dislocation at this time, and therefore by seeking out cases of Hindu officers engaged in the 'oppression' of Syrian traders and cultivators the Resident was hitting this web of interconnections at its most vulnerable point.<sup>19</sup>

In 1816 Munro ordered the missionaries whom he had appointed to the new magisterial posts to act as special advocates on behalf of Syrian plaintiffs, and to collect evidence about Hindu officials who had abused

<sup>18</sup> Norton to CMS Corresponding Secretary 14 Oct. 1816/Box CI 2/E1/CMSA; journal entry 5 Dec. 1821, MS Mill 204/fo. 28r/Bodleian.

<sup>19</sup> Munro to CMS Corresponding Secretary 6 Sept. 1817/Box CI 2/E1/CMSA.

their powers by 'extorting' goods and cash from St Thomas Christians.<sup>20</sup> This policy of singling out one section of the population as a client group and encouraging them to circumvent the machinery of justice and revenue collection could only aggravate existing tensions amongst land-holders and traders. But what made these moves all the more inflammatory was the fact that the role of the local office-holders, most of whom were Nayar notables known as *pravrattikkars*, was not limited to the collection of commercial imposts and land revenue. These state officers had an equally important function in local religious activity: it was they who organised contributions of goods and services for Hindu temple festivals. Indeed, as in so many other aspects of south Indian life, there was no clear distinction between 'secular' administrative tasks and the organisation of corporate rituals. Both served to order and integrate the state's political networks, and both fell within the domain of Hindu office-holders.<sup>21</sup>

This was precisely the area in which the Resident was most determined to rescue the Syrians from Hindu 'oppression'. Munro was aware that large numbers of Syrians were donors at local Hindu temple festivals, and as far as he and his missionary allies were concerned the Keralan Christians could only be participating in these 'abominable heathen orgies' under duress. In reality the role of donor was a privilege and a sign of rank and honour for Hindus as well as Syrians. Both Christian and Hindu festival donors were allocated the right to make offerings of goods, cash and services according to a complex series of judgements about the rank and ritual entitlements of local clan and caste groups. The *pravrattikkars* were no more than agents who made the actual collections once these local schemes of rank and honour had been worked out. At the best of times these were delicately balanced schemes of honour and precedence, but this was a period of exceptional stress and uncertainty for the whole population. This explains the intensity of the reaction when Munro sent out orders banning the 'forced' participation of Syrians in Hindu temple ceremonies. Munro's intention was merely to relieve the group of their so-called disabilities, but in this period of heightened tension and instability the consequences went beyond anything he might have anticipated. It did not matter that the supposed 'problem' of forced exactions had never existed: there were clearly any number of local

<sup>20</sup> Rev. T. Norton to Madras Corresponding Secretary CMS/14 Oct. 1816/Box CI 2/E1/CMSA.

<sup>21</sup> Trav. Dewan's correspondence 8 Apr. 1896/Cover file 2669/TGER; Petition of 18 July 1891/Cover file 1920/TGER; Ibrahim Kunju, *Rise of Travancore*, pp. 107–8.

conflicts which could now be recast as cases of friction and rivalry between Syrians and clean-caste Hindus.<sup>22</sup>

### **The disruption of the Keralan 'honours' systems**

As early as 1821 the touring Anglican missionary W.H. Mill encountered unmistakable signs of tension between clean-caste Hindus and Syrians in localities which had previously operated schemes of joint Hindu and Christian utsavam (temple festival) shares. What Mill found was that funds provided under Munro's scheme of grants to Syrian churches were creating bitter conflicts between Syrians and caste Hindus.<sup>23</sup> There was unrest in Cennanur, for example, a town in which a St Thomas Christian church stood almost adjoining a sizeable Hindu temple. When the Syrians sought to use their new funds to rebuild the main pathway and procession route leading to the Cennanur church, the locality's *savarna* or caste Hindu residents sent a group of Brahmans to block the path and stop the work. (The tactic which was being used here was a form of sitting *dharna*, i.e. bringing moral pressure to bear on an opponent by threatening to bring harm to the sacred person of a Brahman.)<sup>24</sup> Thus where once the St Thomas Christians had been perceived as a high-ranking caste group, in effect the Cennanur caste Hindus were now asserting that Syrians were ritually polluting, that they were no longer to be distinguished from low-caste Christian converts, and that they had no right of access to the precincts of a Hindu temple.

Over the next sixty years there was a dramatic deterioration in ties between Syrians and caste Hindus in localities all over southern Kerala. In 1841, for example, there were fierce outbreaks in several centres where Nayar landholders and other notables sought to exclude Syrians from access to temple precincts. At least one of these confrontations occurred in Ambalapuzha where Syrians had played such a prominent role in Hindu rites during the eighteenth century and where the image of St Thomas had previously been carried in the Ambalapuzha temple's festival processions.<sup>25</sup>

Until the middle of the century these were still isolated incidents, and

<sup>22</sup> British officials in the Tamil country were also being pressed to protect 'native' Christians from 'forced contributions' to the region's 'heathen pagodas and ceremonies'. BOR vol. 4701/13 Sept. 1827/pp. 93-4/TNA.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. journal entry 23 Nov. 1821/MS Mill 204/fo. 21r/Bodleian.

<sup>24</sup> Journal entry 28 Nov. 1821/MS Mill 204/fo. 23r/Bodleian. On other clashes in the 1820s see Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, p. 246.

<sup>25</sup> Resident to Dewan of Travancore, 26 Mar. 1841; 27 Nov. 1841; 29 Nov. 1841 and petition to Dewan from 'Syrians of Ramamunkulan' 16 Dec. 1841/MSSR/NAI.

in many localities the old bonds between Syrians and caste Hindus still prevailed. During the 1850s, however, a combination of economic pressures and changes in official policy brought about a much more generalised unravelling of ceremonial ties and exchanges. These changes began when the Madras government ordered the two ruling houses to cut back on the great festivals of state which still survived as signs of the ruler's authority to rank and incorporate his subjects. The evangelical Protestant missionaries played a central role in these developments: their sensationalised accounts of events such as the Hiranyagharbha, the ritual rebirth of the Travancore raja from the womb of a golden cow, provided much of the ammunition for the government's attacks on the realms' 'waste' and 'spendthrift indulgence'. As a result of these campaigns many of the main eighteenth-century state rituals were abandoned altogether. Some of the missionaries even made incongruous Dickensian proposals to turn the state's Brahman *uttupuras* (charitable feeding houses) into a chain of workhouses open to persons of all castes. There was also a call to transform the sexennial Brahman-feasting festival, the *murajapam*, into a 'Grand Exhibition of products, arts and manufactures' along the lines of the Great Exhibition of 1851.<sup>26</sup>

This breakdown in sacred networks at state level was reflected in a similar collapse in systems of ceremonial exchange and precedence within the localities. During the eighteenth century the Keralan rajas had introduced a form of land tenure known as *viruticari*. This was a kind of *inam* or rent-free service grant which remunerated Hindu families who had been vested with responsibility for contributing goods and services to the region's temples and Brahman feeding houses. The *viruti* system overlapped with the pravrattikkar's role in organising utsavam (temple festival) contributions. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a long period of price inflation and increased revenue demand had placed added pressures on the middling Nayar cultivators who held viruti tenures and most of the states' pravrattikkar posts. The breakdown of the viruticari system interfered with the conduct of temple rituals, and thus added to the tensions which were affecting schemes of ceremonial rank and precedence throughout the region.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Mateer, *Land of Charity*, pp. 17–18; Political Despatch from Court of Directors no. 2/4 May 1853; 2030/21 Jul. 1852 in MS vol. 'Letters from Resident to Dewan' 1 Aug. 1850 to 28 Feb. 1853; 1458/31 Jul. 1855; 1557/15 Aug. 1855/'Letters from Resident to Dewan' 16 Feb. 1855 to 31 Dec. 1856/MSSR/NAI; Resident to Dewan 31 Jul. 1855/Cover file 294/TGER.

<sup>27</sup> Memorandum from Dewan of Travancore 15 Jul. 1895, Cover file 2656/TGER; Report on *viruti* tenure 12 June 1889/Cover file 1664/TGER; *Travancore Administration Reports* 1872–4, 1889–90; Petition from '64 viruthi tenants of Sheraingil district' 18 July 1891/Cover file 1920/TGER; Velu Pillai, *Manual*, III, pp. 216–19. According to Robin Jeffrey, Travancore experienced severe social dislocation after 1860 as a result of rapid

As before, it was the bonds between Syrians and clean-caste Hindus which proved most vulnerable to dislocation and collapse. Indeed what remained of this precarious equilibrium was overturned completely when the CMS launched a campaign to gain enhanced rank and standing for any untouchable or low-caste Hindu who converted to Christianity. Using all the publicity skills at their command, the missionaries broadcast the claim that all converts, whatever their caste origins, possessed the same status as Syrians, and indeed that all Keralan converts *were* effectively Syrians. In appeals, petitions and widely circulated journals and pamphlets, the missionaries insisted that once a low-caste Pulaya or Ezhava became a Christian, he was entitled to all the marks of social and ritual standing held by Syrians, including the right to enter Hindu temple streets and all the other privileged precincts from which they had previously been banned. As in Tuticorin and the other embattled Christian centres of Tamilnad (to be discussed below) this programme of mission-led advocacy was taken up as a means of exacting new rights and 'honours' within existing Hindu status systems. Here too the results were violent and destabilising: there were clashes and street battles in localities all across northern Travancore and Cochin as the missionaries encouraged low-caste converts to press for access to privileged temple streets and procession routes. In each case groups of demonstrators claimed that they were entitled to these marks of elevated ritual standing because conversion to Christianity had 'made them Syrian'. The missionaries too cited the Syrians as a reference point in their demands for social 'equality' for their adherents.<sup>28</sup>

economic 'modernisation'. Unlike the Nayars, he says, the Syrians possessed entrepreneurial skills and an individualistic spirit, hence their move into cash cropping and plantation agriculture. The Syrians 'recognised no concept of ritual purity' and 'never allowed [their] concern for high-caste sensibilities to interfere with their commercial activities'. As a result there was a massive transfer of wealth from Nayars to Syrians (and also to low-caste Christians) during the later nineteenth century; this is supposed to have been fiercely resented by the once-'dominant' Nayars. (*The Decline of Nayar Dominance*, pp. 122–9, 201–4, 267) Changes in Travancore's economy may well have added to existing tensions in the society. But in this account, Keralan society 'had survived fundamentally unchanged for 700 years [and then] came unhinged [in the last half of the nineteenth century]' (*ibid.* p. 265). Given the rapidity of the changes which took place in the region during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Malabar coast was certainly not a static backwater which suddenly came 'unhinged' as British rule 'modernised' the region. The Syrians certainly did observe stringent standards of ritual purity; until well into the nineteenth century these were almost indistinguishable from those of the higher Nayar subdivisions. Such an argument also fails to account for the breakdown in relations between Syrians and clean-caste Hindus during the early part of the nineteenth century, long before this supposed period of 'modernisation'.

<sup>28</sup> *CM Record* 8152, pp. 180–3; Petition 15 Feb. 1851/MS Section Book 'Letters to Resident' 1 May 1851 to 27 Aug. 1851; report 26 June 1851 *ibid.*/TGER; Letter from the Rev. J. Hawksworth (n.d.) 2222 'Letters from Resident to Dewan' 1 Aug. 1850 to 28 Feb. 1853/MSSR; letter 3 June 1853/Cover file 215/TGER.

Until the nineteenth century the notion that Syrian Christians were to be equated with *avarna* (low-caste or polluting) converts was entirely alien to the group's standing in the society. Now, though, it was gaining wider and wider currency thanks to the missionaries' publicity machine. By 1855 Nayers and other Hindus in localities all over Cochin and Travancore were treating Syrians as a ritually polluting caste category, just as if they were *Ezhavas* or untouchables. Clashes between Syrians and Nayers became increasingly common as the group came to be associated with violence, disruption and attacks on the purity and status of Nayar notables and other clean-caste Hindus.<sup>29</sup>

This grievance had its roots in a particularly provocative campaign tactic which came to be used during ceremonial 'honours disputes' involving Christians. One of the CMS missionaries described the technique in 1867: 'I am now trying to amalgamate two congregations at Arpukara, one Chogan [*Ezhava*] and the other Pulayan ['untouchable' cultivating caste]. The latter has members of it most turbulent in forcing themselves into the presence of Nayers and Brahmans and 'polluting' them...and getting beaten or into prison [*sic*] and then reporting themselves persecuted for Christianity's sake.'<sup>30</sup> Although the missionaries professed to deplore such moves, this form of agitation – acts of intentional pollution directed against high-caste Hindus and their shrines – became a recurrent motif in campaigns of mass conversion and social 'uplift' involving Protestant missionary groups in Travancore and Cochin.

While the Europeans intended these campaigns as a radical attack on 'heathenism' and caste 'disabilities', they were really just a form of the status or 'honours' disputes which had long since become a familiar part of south Indian social life. There was nothing particularly 'modern' about these conflicts, and they were certainly not an attempt to overturn caste or its so-called 'disabilities'. But such attacks clearly did have the effect of exacerbating social tensions in the region. Furthermore, because of the CMS campaign to link their militant converts with the Syrians, the bitterness and outrage they caused tended to rebound on the St Thomas Christians.

By the mid-1880s the breakdown in ties between Syrians and Malayali caste Hindus had reached its final stage. Syrians were now routinely excluded from Hindu festival rites, and in many temple centres Hindu

<sup>29</sup> *CM Record* 1856, pp. 164–5; Dewan to Resident (n.d.) 1093/1851/Section Book 'Letters to Resident' May 1851 to Aug. 1851; Dewan to Resident 10 May 1851/Cover file 805/TGER; Hawksworth to Resident 7 Oct. 1854/no. 1853/'Letters to Dewan' 2 Mar. 1853 to 15 Feb. 1855/MSSR/NAI.

<sup>30</sup> Rev. H. Baker quoted in Hunt, *Anglican Church in Travancore*, pp. 103–4.

office-holders levied fines on Christians who tried to uphold their long-standing temple honours. Some of these notables even declared that St Thomas Christians who sought access to the temples were guilty of polluting sacred Hindu precincts. During the 1880s and 1890s there were innumerable riots between Hindus and Syrians. Even Shertallai, ancestral home of the Parayil Tharakons, became a regular venue for inter-communal battles during Hindu processional festivals. These outbreaks closely resembled the Hindu–Muslim clashes of north India. Just as in the towns of the Punjab, Bihar and the North Western Provinces, the region's main annual religious festivals became a time for provocation and score-settling with processions of Hindu and Syrian celebrants marching past one another's shrines, 'howling, screaming and crying out obscene words' as one Syrian petitioner put it.<sup>31</sup>

### **The firming up of communal boundaries**

The rise of these bitter and sustained social conflicts shows how far the region had moved from its old 'integrated' social order. Before the nineteenth century the Syrians had comprised a status group which closely resembled the broad, amorphous Hindu status categories of the region. The identity of the élite Syrian warriors, office-holders and merchant-groups had overlapped and even fused with that of the upper Nayar sub-divisions. Syrians had once shared these élite Nayars' standing in the Hindu moral order; they had occupied the same position in the region's schemes of caste rank and ritual purity and held reciprocal shares in important local utsavams and festivals of state. Indeed Syrians and Nayars may even have intermarried during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

By the later nineteenth century, however, these loose and flexible corporate identities had taken on a very different form. Both the Syrians and their savarna (clean-caste) antagonists, particularly the upper Nayar caste groups, had begun to behave like the sort of communities which have often been described as 'traditional', that is as groups confronting one another across a set of fixed and exclusive corporate boundaries. This breakdown in the Syrians' external relationships – their links and ceremonial ties to the region's caste Hindus – was also accompanied

<sup>31</sup> Petition to Dewan 28 Feb. 1886/Cover file 1006; Petition from Jacobite Metran to Dewan/22 Feb. 1895/Cover file 801; Dewan to Resident 9 Oct. 1890/Cover file 2381; Petition to Resident 27 June 1888/Cover file 3713; Petition to Dewan from Syrian Catholic katanar, Shertallai/23 Mar. 1891/Cover file 1616; Resident to Dewan/30 Mar. 1891/Cover file 1616/TGER.

by a series of drastic internal upheavals. Here too there was a hardening of boundaries. Until the nineteenth century there was no firm distinction between members of the two main Syrian confessional groupings – ‘Jacobite’ or ‘orthodox’ Syrians on the one hand, and the ‘Romo-Syrians’ who were claimed as affiliates by the region’s Roman Catholic mission hierarchy on the other. Until the missionaries set about ‘reforming’ them, Jacobites and Romo-Syrians regularly intermarried; many churches were shared in common between members of the two jurisdictions, and the great Syrian tomb shrines were venerated by Catholic and orthodox Syrians alike. Typical of these shared cult sites was the ancient Syrian church at Kottamankalam. In the early nineteenth century this church was controlled by a set of priestly families who recognised the authority of the ‘Jacobite’ metran. Even so, the church contained the tomb of Mar Basilius (d. 1794), one of the west Asian bishops who had arrived in Malabar in the middle of the eighteenth century with credentials from the Nestorian Catholicos. As of 1831 this hero-prelate’s cattam or commemoration festivals were still attracting great crowds of Jacobites and Romo-Syrians, as well as many Nayers and Ezhavas.<sup>32</sup>

The distinction between Catholic and Jacobite Syrians was thus a question of allegiance and factional alignment rather than one of conflicting belief and observance. The dominant families in each locality tended to shift back and forth between allegiance to the metran and the Roman Catholic church hierarchy. In their style of worship and church furnishing there was no clear-cut divide between the two groups: J.H. Mill, the Anglican missionary who toured the region in the 1820s, expected to find a rampant ‘Romishness’ – elaborate ‘ritualism’, the veneration of images and relics – among all the Catholic Syrians, and a complete absence of all these supposedly ‘papist’ trappings in the Jacobite churches. To his annoyance Mill encountered many Syrian Catholic churches which contained fewer ‘papist’-style images and statues than those controlled by the Jacobites, and he complained that while some Jacobite churches were austere and un-‘papistical’, he had also found many Jacobite centres where there were images and other ‘Romish’ trappings, and where the ‘mass [was] said in a very popish style’.<sup>33</sup>

All this began to change under that indefatigable anti-‘papist’ Colonel Munro. According to the Protestant evangelicals, ‘The Christian religion has degenerated in the Roman Catholic churches of Malayala, into the most abominable superstitions: which are equal to many, if not all the

<sup>32</sup> *CM Record* 1831, p. 118.

<sup>33</sup> Diary entries 9 Jan. 1822, 17 Dec. 1821/MS Mill 204/fo. 44r, 35r, Bodleian.

disgusting ceremonies of the monstrous worship of Brahma.’<sup>34</sup> Like many of their contemporaries, the Resident and his missionary allies perceived the Catholic church hierarchy in India as a kind of fifth column sowing pro-French sedition amongst its adherents. It was held that India’s European Catholic missionaries were relentless expansionists, and that they had been extending their influence by inducing the Keralan Romo-Syrians to seize churches and church property from the Syrian Jacobites. According to Munro and his fellow evangelicals, the way to reverse the supposed ‘decay’ and ‘decline’ of the Syrians was to recover all these lost properties and resources on their behalf.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, given that these groups were far from being separate or rival communities, this must be seen as yet another of the imaginary disabilities which the region’s would-be reformers set out to redress. Here too the sudden availability of funds and patronage served to foster tensions which had not existed before. The Jacobites were supposed to use Munro’s relief money to buy out their Romo-Syrian co-sharers and take sole control of the region’s mutually managed churches. What this meant, though, was that for the first time since the creation of the two jurisdictions in the seventeenth century, the Syrians had acquired a real incentive to treat the two denominations as separate and exclusive affiliations. The result was that the region acquired yet another form of sectarian or inter-communal conflict. By the early 1830s it was common for groups claiming Jacobite and Romo-Syrian affiliation to stage pitched battles over the allocation of churches and church properties.<sup>36</sup>

### **The crisis of leadership**

An even greater source of tension was the campaign of spiritual ‘uplift’ which the Church Missionary Society directed at the Jacobites. With Munro’s backing this so-called ‘mission of rescue’ was supposed to wipe out the group’s ‘popish superstitions’ and ‘heathenish practices’. In place of charms, cattams and saint cults, the non-Catholic Syrians were to be infused with a passion for prayer meetings, individual ‘conversion experiences’, Bible reading and all the other hallmarks of the Protestant evangelical tradition. During the 1820s the CMS set up a network of schools, a printing press for Malayalam Bibles and evangelical tracts and a training college for Syrian katanars which became the official residence of

<sup>34</sup> Day, *Land of the Permauls*, p. 248.

<sup>35</sup> Rev. B. Bailey to CMS Corresponding Secretary/14 Jan. 1818/Box CI 2/E2/CMSA.

<sup>36</sup> *CM Record* 1831, pp. 112–17; Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, pp. 267–8.

the Jacobite metran.<sup>37</sup> The new college was located in Kottayam, near the famous Cheriapalli or 'great church' which contained several of the Syrians' most sacred cult shrines, including the tomb of the hero-bishop Mar Gabriel (resident in Travancore 1708 – 31).

Because of its proximity to these sites, the creation of this new mission-sponsored residence for the metran might have gone far to create a viable tradition of authority for the new non-Pakalammaram chief clerics. They could still claim to be in control of the key Kottayam cult shrines, and, following the Resident's orders, the missionaries took care to make an elaborate show of deference to the new metran whenever he appeared in public. These displays of homage implied that the metran was still a man of 'kingly' standing. It was true that he had been incorporated into the new colonial realm, but as agents of this new colonial state the missionaries could be said to be acting much like the state officers who had endowed generations of earlier Syrian notables with signs of honour and kingliness within the royal networks of the region's eighteenth-century rulers.<sup>38</sup>

The problem, though, was that the missionaries expected to use these links with the metran to spread their message of 'purified' Christianity amongst the Jacobite priesthood and the Syrian population at large. When the Syrians – or more specifically the Syrian Jacobites – had first been 'discovered' by evangelically-minded British travellers, they had been described in glowing terms as a 'primitive' church whose Christianity was a miraculous survival from the days of the early church fathers.<sup>39</sup> To these British evangelicals the veneration of cult shrines, the enactment of cattam festivals and all the other key features of Syrian religious life were nothing more than a superficial gloss of 'popish superstition' and 'heathenish ceremonies'. None of the early missionaries realised that these supposed 'accretions' were really the cornerstones of Syrian faith and worship and that they were used to confirm the status of the group's church notables. Thus although the Jacobites were supposed to have been 'plundered and insulted' by the Portuguese and the Hindu rajas of Malabar, it was claimed that they were still basically 'uncorrupted' by Catholic doctrines. With the right guidance and instruction they would soon return to their 'former greatness' and abandon their many 'errors' and 'idoltrous customs'.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Munro to CMS Corresponding Secretary 3 Jan. 1816/Box C12/E1/CMSA; Hunt, *Anglican Church in Travancore*, pp. 54–79; Mackworth, *Diary*, p. 70; Cheriyan, *Malabar Syrians*, p. 134; 'Copy of a Corresponding Relative to the Syrian Christians'/MS Mill 192/fo. 133r–136v/Bodleian.

<sup>38</sup> Mackworth, *Diary*, pp. 70, 89–90.

<sup>39</sup> Buchanan, *Christian Researches*, pp. 146–82.

<sup>40</sup> Munro to Madras Govt., 1818, quoted in Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, p. 11.

This romanticism was short-lived. Once the so-called mission of rescue began its work, the Anglicans based at Kottayam were soon locked in combat with the church notables whom they were supposed to be 'regenerating'. It became clear that clients or not, the metran and the priestly families who were close to him had no intention of submitting to the CMS reform policies, particularly those which would have interfered with the veneration of the great cult shrines from which they had once derived so much power and prestige. Hostility escalated on both sides. Where once British evangelicals had praised the 'ancient simplicity and purity' of the Syrians' faith, the missionaries now began to condemn their Jacobite protégés for being everything that was most abhorrent to the true-blue evangelical. They were 'cold and heartless in the performance of ritual'; they clung insistently to their 'errors' and 'abuses', their church 'was in a state of spiritual death,' it was even said that 'there is no real Christianity among them'.<sup>41</sup>

By the 1830s the CMS was producing long lists of the group's 'unChristian' rites and doctrines – the offering of prayers for the dead, the 'worship' of the Virgin and the saints with processions, fasts and supplications, prostrations before images of God the Father, the cult veneration of deceased bishops and their tombs. These critics came from a younger and more fiery generation of CMS recruits; they were horrified by the 'idolatrous' nature of Syrian festivals with their music, bawdy songs and Hindu-style drumming and their parading of cult images of the Virgin Mary. They were also full of outrage at the fact that after fifteen years of exhortation and instruction, the katanars who had been trained by the mission were still performing 'Romish' veilings, censings, genuflexions and prostrations in their church rites, and that the group's church worship still featured bells, candles and incense and all the other 'mummeries' and 'vain ceremonies' which the CMS associated with 'vile papistry' and 'heathenism'. Indeed for these missionaries the problem went far beyond individual errors in belief and practice. Their reports insisted that the whole population was frankly 'paganised', there was widespread use of 'heathenish enchantments &c [*sic*] in sickness and danger' and the group as a whole were in a state of 'general ignorance and depravity'.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Rev. Joseph Peet, April 1843. Quoted in *Letters and Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*, vol. 126, Madura Mission 1837–43, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>42</sup> Reports from the Rev. B. Bailey *et al.* to CMS Corresponding Secretary, Feb. 1835/vol. CMS 38/ICHA; Rev. J.W. Woodcock in *CM Record* 1835, p. 222; Report by CMS Corresponding Secretary 1838/pub. in *CM Intelligencer* 7:10 (1856), p. 221–2.

By now the metran and his 'dissolute' and 'degraded' priesthood were being identified as the source of all this 'error' and resistance; gone were the days when all Syrians were seen as the innocent victims of papist or 'pagan Hindoo' oppression.<sup>43</sup> Instead of heeding the missionaries' exhortations, the Syrian clergy were said to 'encourage the people in their vain superstitions, of which the effect is to dishonour Christ and to ruin souls'.<sup>44</sup> The missionaries particularly deplored the tradition of child-ordination under which élite or 'ordainable' Syrian families paid a set fee to have their sons initiated into the lower orders of the diaconate. As far as the CMS was concerned this was a corrupt system designed to enrich the metran and his circle, and there were hints of even worse sins and depravities involving the boy deacons in their charge. 'The Metropolitan [metran] is altogether a bad man, by the canons of the Church he might be suspended from office for his continual acts of simony, to say nothing of his notorious vices.'<sup>45</sup>

This new combative spirit was soon translated into direct action. By the mid-1830s, well before the mission had begun to cast doubt on the group's clean-caste standing by claiming 'Syrian' status for low-caste converts, the CMS had devised a tactic which involved an attack on Syrian ritual purity within the group's own sacred precincts. The evangelicals had a special loathing for the group's cattams or saint-cult festivals with their fasts and processions and ordeals of self-mortification.<sup>46</sup> What the missionaries now did was to tour the St Thomas Christians' major saint-cult festivals, including the great Kayankulam cattam in honour of the Jacobite bishop Mar Basilios, and the feast at the Kanankot tomb shrine the ramban (monk) Phillippos, companion of the eighteenth-century west Asian prelate Mar Ivanios. As the proceedings began the missionaries would harangue the crowds, denouncing the 'ridiculous and idolatrous rites' which they were witnessing and then intentionally laying hands on the leading donors and other participants. The effect was to pollute Syrian worshippers who had undergone lengthy rites of purification in order to take part in the rites. The crowds would flee in order to avoid the defiling touch of the foreigner, and the missionaries reported gleefully on their ability to break up whole festivals in this way.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, pp. 241–2; *CM Record* 1831, p. 114, 1841, p. 121.

<sup>44</sup> Report by J. Tucker, CMS Corresponding Secretary, Feb. 1835/vol. CMS 38/ICHA, Bangalore.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> One popular penance was to roll round and round a church at festival time. (Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, p. 268.) As will be seen below, similar ordeals were performed at Tamil Christian cult shrines, as well as at Hindu and Muslim holy places.

<sup>47</sup> *CM Record* 1851, p. 228.

With its deft use of existing perceptions of purity and ritual status, this CMS tactic of intentional pollution was closely related to the campaigns in which the missionaries' untouchable Christian converts sought to pollute high-caste Hindus and their temple zones. For the Syrians, these humiliations were yet another destabilising force in the group's religious and social life. The group's relationships with clean-caste Hindus had already been undermined; there were conflicts between Jacobites and Romo-Syrians and widespread battles over succession to the metranship, and now the group's cattam or saint-cult festivals were being disrupted and their purity as Christian worshippers attacked.

In 1836 these confrontations led the metran and his supporters to make a formal break with the CMS, and this created a further sectarian rift within the community. The CMS abolished the 'mission of rescue' and began recruiting its own converts just like the other conventional Christian missionary organisations. Initially the great majority of Syrian Jacobites maintained at least nominal ties to the metran, and, now that he had lost the endorsement of the CMS, the metran sought to shore up his authority by reaffirming his ties to the Patriarch of Antioch.<sup>48</sup> Given the shakiness of the metran's position it is not surprising that some Jacobites renounced his authority altogether and declared themselves affiliates of the CMS. This was the first in what was soon to become a continual proliferation of splits, divisions and breakaway movements amongst the Syrians.

By the end of the nineteenth century the St Thomas Christians were divided into over a dozen different churches and confessional groupings, all competing for recruits and resources. Their adherents frequently shifted from one affiliation to another, but as of 1901, when the new confessional boundaries were beginning to stabilise, the Census reported that there were about 10,000 St Thomas Christians within the Syrian Anglican grouping. These worshippers used a Malayalam liturgy which been 'reformed' and 'purified' by the CMS, and they had allowed the mission to purge them of 'papist' and 'ritualistic' observances.<sup>49</sup> As in the sixteenth century when the Portuguese Padroado maintained the separation between Syrian and low-caste convert churches, this small group of Syrian Anglicans had its own places of worship and was never required to attend services with the mission's ever-growing numbers of low-caste converts.

This was a comparatively small-scale rift, but it provided clear proof of

<sup>48</sup> Cheriyan, *Malabar Syrians*, pp. 390–1; *CM Record* 1838, p. 130; 1841, pp. 120–1; 1847, pp. 230–3; 1848, p. 209.

<sup>49</sup> *Census of India 1901*, XXVI, Pt 1, pp. 113–14.

the weakness and low standing of the Jacobite metran Mar Dionysius IV. While relatively few Syrians were willing to become Anglican converts, the 'reformist' message which the mission had introduced into Kerala had been taken up by a set of powerful Jacobite families, most of whom were located in the more southerly Syrian centres around Cennanur and Maramon. (After 1888 this breakaway group formed its own separate ecclesiastical organisation, the Mar Thoma Syrian church: the 1901 Census reported a total of 37,200 of these Mar Thomites, all Syrian Christians who had separated from the Jacobite Syrian population.)<sup>50</sup> The leading figures in this new movement were two clerics, an uncle and nephew, who belonged to an established priestly family from Maramon. The elder priest Abraham Palakunnathu (1769 – 1845) was hereditary katanar of the Maramon church and a celebrated *malpan* or Syriac preceptor with the authority to train deacons for the priesthood. Both of these clerics had been attached to the CMS college at Kottayam. After the 1836 split, the mission's call for reform and purification and its attack on the supposed laxity and corruption of the Jacobite priesthood provided a rallying point for these families as they launched their own move to overturn the authority of the beleaguered Jacobite metran.<sup>51</sup>

Instead of being tamely assimilated into the Anglican mission organisation, the Palakunnathus made a bid to seize the metranship for themselves. In their petitions to the British authorities they echoed the missionaries' attacks on the incumbent metran and couched their appeals in the language of evangelical 'reform' and purification. At the same time, in order to acquire legitimacy in the eyes of other Syrians, they needed to re-channel the stream of episcopal legitimacy which was held to emanate from the west Asian patriarchs and which flowed along the line of former metrans and overseas bishop-saints. The best way to achieve this would be through an act of consecration by the Jacobite Patriarch himself: this would immediately cast doubt on the status and title of the incumbent metran. Therefore in 1841 Abraham's nephew Mathew Palakunnathu (1818–77) travelled to the primate's seat at the Deir Za'faran monastery

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* The 'Romo-Syrians' or Syrian Catholics remained in an overall majority in Kerala: in the 1901 Travancore Census they outnumbered the Syrian Jacobites by 256,000 to 182,000. Jacobites and CMS Syrian affiliates were concentrated in southern Travancore: in the area between Kottayam and Mavelikkara they outnumbered Syrian Catholics by three to one. The greatest concentrations of Syrian Catholics were in the districts north of Kottayam, in centres such as Canganasseri, Kuravilangat, Palni and Vaikom, and in the northeast mountain zone at Thodupuzha. Vellu Pillai, *Manual*, VI, pp. 740–2; *Census of India 1901*, XXVI, Pt. 1, pp. 113–4.

<sup>51</sup> Cheriyan, *Malabar Syrians*, pp. 287–93; Brown, *Indian Christians*, pp. 140–1; C.M. Agur, *Church History of Travancore* (Madras, 1903), pp. 125–8.

near Mardin in western Kurdistan. Despite the fact that the incumbent metran had only just declared his allegiance to the Patriarch, the Jacobite primate consecrated this Palakunnathu claimant and proclaimed him metran of the Indian Jacobite churches under the title Mar Mathew Athanasius.<sup>52</sup>

The Patriarch's moves are probably best understood as a consequence of the weakness and poverty of the west Asian churches. Echoing his contemporaries' complaints about the Malabar Syrians, a British cleric who travelled through Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in the 1840s found the region's ancient Nestorian and Jacobite churches and monasteries in decay, its bishops either 'indolent' or 'grasping' and its priests scratching a meagre living from petty trading.<sup>53</sup> Since the Nestorian primate (the Catholicos) was in communion with Rome, the region had become a base for energetic French Catholic missionaries who were pushing the Nestorians to claim jurisdiction over the region's old Jacobite communities. Throughout the nineteenth century the west Asian Jacobites shifted back and forth across these thin confessional boundaries, and so the Jacobite patriarch was engaged in a desperate scramble to retain his authority and resources.<sup>54</sup>

It is not surprising then that the Jacobite primate Mar Elias should seek to build up links with almost any line of clerics who might give him access to the rich Jacobite communities of southern India. The result, though, was that the Patriarch's intervention added greatly to the conflict and fragmentation which was now overtaking virtually all the region's Syrian localities. First, the return of the newly consecrated Mar Mathew Athanasius provoked fierce battles between supporters of the aspiring new Palakunnathu metran and followers of the incumbent chief prelate. The Patriarch then sent two or possibly three bishops of his own to the Malabar coast, and each of them promptly began his own battle for ecclesiastical supremacy in the Syrian localities.<sup>55</sup>

Many Syrian Catholics were drawn into these struggles, partly because the appeal of foreign bishops still transcended the Jacobite – Catholic

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* Mar Mathew's MS journal with its account of the journey to Mardin is preserved in the Mar Thoma Seminary Library, Kottayam.

<sup>53</sup> Rev. G.P. Badger, *The Nestorians and their Rituals. With the Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotamia and Coordistan in 1842–1844 and of a Late Visit to those Countries in 1850* (2 vols., London 1852), I, p. 62; Donald Attwater, *The Christian Churches of the East*, I, *Churches in Communion With Rome* (revised edn, Milwaukee, 1948), pp. 152–5.

<sup>54</sup> Even Mar Athanasius, the west Asian bishop who caused the Travancore and Cochin uproar of the 1820s, became a Roman Catholic 'convert' after he was deported from India in 1825. Badger, *The Nestorians*, I, p. 44.

<sup>55</sup> Resident to Chief Secretary Madras Govt./MEP 12 Aug. 1856/334/P/2062/IOL; Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity*, p. 148.

divide, and also because the Romo-Syrians were engaged in conflicts of their own with two rival missionary groups, the Carmelites and the Goa-based priests who had originally been under the authority of the Portuguese Padroado. In many localities, dissident Syrian Catholics tried to wring concessions from their priests and missionaries by threatening to 'convert' to one of the embattled Jacobite affiliations. This long struggle between Syrian Catholics and their missionaries began with the suppression of the Padroado's authority in south India in 1838 (revived in 1886). European Carmelite missionaries tried to take control of churches which had formerly been under the authority of the Goan hierarchy, and this was fiercely opposed by many of the old Syrian Catholic priestly families.<sup>56</sup>

These tensions worsened in the second half of the century when the Carmelites launched a 'reforming' purification campaign of their own. The aim here was to 'regenerate' the Romo-Syrian priesthood by abolishing the right of the Syrian Catholic malpans to train young priests. A number of powerful malpan lineages appealed to the Nestorian Catholicos at Mosul to send them bishops. Like the embattled Jacobite patriarch, the west Asian Nestorian primate Joseph VI Audo also launched a campaign to claim authority over the St Thomas Christians, and he too sent out a series of prelates. The most influential of these were two bishops called Mar Mellus and Mar Rokkos who arrived in Kerala in 1861 and 1874, and the conflicting demands made by these clerics threw the Syrian Catholics into even greater turmoil.<sup>57</sup> As a result this early split was soon followed by a series of much larger rifts and separatist breakaway movements amongst both the Syrian Catholics and the Jacobite or non-Catholic St Thomas Christians.

### **The Syrian 'spiritual revival'**

Although the arrival of foreign prelates had long been a source of unrest and conflict amongst the Syrians, the clashes which hit the Jacobites in the 1840s after the arrival of the Patriarch's new bishops were more violent

<sup>56</sup> Abraham, M. Nidhiry, *Father Nidhiry (1842–1904): A History of His Times* (Kottayam, 1971), pp. 40–5; 80–238; A.M. Mundadan, '19th Century "Autonomy" Movement Among Syrian Catholics', *ICHR*, 8:2 (1974), pp. 111–30; Agur, *Church History*, p. 105; Mackenzie, 'History of Christianity', pp. 196–7.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* After the departure of the second of these prelates in 1882, his adherents formed a breakaway church in Trichur led by the head of the powerful malpan family who had been in conflict with the European Carmelities. This malpan assumed episcopal rank with the title Mar Abdiso. MEP/31 July 1861; 14 to 20 Aug. 1861; 8 Oct. 1861/IOL; *Madras Catholic Directory for 1880*; Jeffrey, *Nayar Dominance*, p. 121.

and more widespread than ever before. Mar Mathew's followers (and some CMS Anglican Syrians) embarked on a campaign of relic and image-smashing which went well beyond the raids which had been staged in the days of Mar Athanasius or the episcopal claimants of the eighteenth century. As before, the main aim was to discredit the metran and invalidate his authority. Now, though, most of the attackers claimed to be infused with the drive for spiritual regeneration and religious 'revival' which Mar Mathew's supporters had taken over from the CMS. The CMS missionaries had already been organising open-air revival meetings at which crowds of Syrians sang, wept, prayed and bore exultant witness in the characteristic evangelical manner. At the climax of such meetings these 'reborn' Christians were exhorted to root out the 'papisty' and 'heathen idolatry' which surrounded them by smashing the relics and sacred images which had been housed in their churches.<sup>58</sup> In the late 1830s and 1840s the Palakunnathus and their followers began to stage anti-'idolatry' displays of their own. Like those organised by the new CMS affiliates, these public image-smashings sometimes turned into mob attacks on un-'reformed' churches and festival processions. These raids provoked several riots and at least one murder.<sup>59</sup>

While all this produced an ever-increasing level of violence and unrest in Syrian localities, the anti-metran campaign also served to spread the language of evangelical religious enthusiasm much more widely across the Keralan Christian population. Now it was not only the CMS and its few Syrian affiliates who preached fiery sermons and beseeched their followers to confront 'idolatry' and un-Christian 'abuses'. Mar Mathew and his followers also presented themselves as fervent evangelical campaigners, and more specifically as reformers and purifiers who were fighting to wipe out the Syrians' tomb cults and all the other 'corrupt' and 'sinful' observances with which the old metran was identified.<sup>60</sup>

As far as the British were concerned this was a highly successful move. Anglican missionary journals reported the Palakunnathus' agitation as a widespread and authentic 'spiritual awakening' amongst the Syrians, and not as a mere faction-fight between claimants for the metranship. But while it guaranteed the survival of the new Mar Thomite grouping, the

<sup>58</sup> *CM Record* 1838, p. 130; 1841, pp. 120–1; 1842, p. 158; Cheriyan, *Malabar Syrians*, p. 221.

<sup>59</sup> Syrian Jacobites, Romo-Syrians and CMS Anglican affiliates were all involved in these clashes. One occurred in 1852 when a Syrian Catholic priest from Kottayam staged a public bonfire of CMS tracts. There was another in 1861 when a Jacobite cleric spat on a CMS affiliate's translation of the New Testament. *CM Record* 1852, p. 189; 1861, p. 255.

<sup>60</sup> Juhanon Mar Thoma, *Christianity in India, and a Brief History of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church* (Madras, 1968).

spread of this evangelical campaigning style led the Madras authorities to strike their final blow at the stability of the metranship. As before when the British authorities were drawn into these battles between aspiring metrans, they tended to support any would-be church notable who professed evangelical sympathies, and Mar Mathew's reformist language had greatly impressed them. As a result the Resident and the Madras authorities blamed the riots of the 1840s on the incumbent metran and the intruding west Asian bishops. In 1852 the Jacobite succession was overturned once again. The Madras authorities had the foreign prelates expelled, the old metran Mar Dionysius was disavowed, and his office and titles were handed over to Mar Mathew Athanasius, the CMS-trained Palakunnathu cleric from Maramon who had been consecrated by the Patriarch in Mardin in 1841.<sup>61</sup>

This turned out to be the colonial state's final exercise of executive fiat in regard to the Syrians. In 1857 after half a century in which the Jacobite metranship was progressively weakened and discredited, the Madras authorities withdrew the crucial prop of state endorsement from the group's church leaders. In the hope of minimising the government's involvement in controversial religious disputes, it was decided that the states' British Residents were no longer to be allowed to step in and recognise one or other rival claimant to the metranship. These decisions would now take the form of piecemeal rulings by the courts: if aspiring Syrian leaders wished to test their claims of primacy they would have to file civil suits for the control of individual churches and church properties. Not surprisingly this led to a race for funds and property titles which served to intensify all the group's problems of fragmentation and internal conflict. No would-be metran could look to the British Residents for validation and support, and the resulting scramble of litigation did even more damage to the prestige of the group's church notables.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Resident to Dewan 7 Feb. 1851/206/'Letters to Dewan' 1 Aug. 1805 to 28 Feb. 1853/MSRR; MEP 12 Aug. 1856/IOL; Brown, *Indian Christians*, pp. 142–3; G.B. Howard, *The Christians of St Thomas and their Liturgies* (Oxford and London, 1864), pp. 162–3.

<sup>62</sup> Resident's Political Diary 19 to 25 April 1857/MSRR. This followed the Madras government's withdrawal from the administration of Hindu religious foundations. In both regions the withdrawal of state mediation upset delicately balanced systems of rank and precedence, and there was a scramble for control of shrines and their properties. BOR 1754/22 April 1841/12/p. 5682/TNA. On the government's involvement in the adjudication of Hindu 'honours' disputes, see BOR 59/18 June 1792/15–16/pp. 2629–43/TNA; BOR 478/14 Nov. 1808/32/pp. 10211–21/TNA. See also Christopher Baker, 'Temples and political development' in Baker and Washbrook, *South India*, pp. 69–97.

While all this was going on the Jacobite Patriarch helped to muddy the waters even further by repudiating the Palakunnathu metran who had been consecrated at his own church headquarters. In 1865 he gave his imprimatur to the head of yet another Malayali priestly lineage, the Pulikots of Kunnankulam, who had attracted several thousand adherents to a breakaway movement of their own in north Travancore. This naturally intensified the group's internal fragmentation, and there were further violent outbreaks after the arrival of yet more bishops from west Asia. To add the final touch of confusion, the Jacobite Patriarch himself arrived in Travancore in 1875 and began to campaign in person for the aspiring Pulikot metran, who had taken the episcopal title Mar Dionysius V.<sup>63</sup>

By now the most conspicuous features of the group's religious life were its deep internal rifts and succession battles and the spectacular wildfire cults and millenarian salvation movements which began to sweep through the Syrian communities in the second half of the century. Some of these separatist sects and movements were little more than small-scale breakaway churches: beginning in the 1860s bodies such as these were founded in several southern localities including Tiruvella and Maramon.<sup>64</sup> The leaders of these independent churches were charismatic enthusiasts preaching a highly personal brand of evangelical or revivalist Christianity. Most of them had split off from older Jacobite churches after clashing with local priests and worshippers over demands to suppress 'image worship', cult festivals and other signs of un-'reformed' Christianity.

The appearance of these contentious and evanescent splinter churches was provoked in part by the collapse of the old delicately balanced honours systems which had once united Syrian share-holders with Malayali caste Hindus. In addition there were all the lawsuits and faction-fights over control of church properties which were being waged in this period. The spectacle of these uninhibited free-for-alls between the Palakkunathus, the Pulikots and their respective supporters – not to mention the various Syrian Catholic priestly factions – was leading more and more Syrians to dismiss all the community's would-be leaders as corrupt and un-Christian. As a result, these disaffected groups were prepared to look to complete outsiders as a source of leadership and authority.

<sup>63</sup> *CM Record* 1874, p. 120; Resident to Dewan/14 June 1875/365/vol. 19/MSRR; Mar Thoma Athanasius to Dewan/14 Aug. 1889/Cover file 3797/TGER; Brown, *Indian Christians*, p. 147.

<sup>64</sup> *CM Record* 1862, pp. 305–6; 1866, pp. 327–8, 332–3; 1867, p. 312; 1868, pp. 295–304; 1873, p. 310.

Even the appeal of itinerant west Asian bishops was wearing thin for these disaffected Christians, and many of them now turned to touring evangelists from the mission outposts of Tamilnad. The most successful of these newcomers was a set of Tamil Brahman converts with an affiliation to one of the more eccentric Victorian sectarian bodies, the Plymouth Brethren. This group of eschatological Christian fundamentalists had already established a base in Tirunelveli. Beginning in 1867, two of its Tamil Brahman adherents set out on preaching tours along the Malabar coast, and their efforts produced a sizeable following amongst the Syrians of central and southern Kerala. The sect's galvanising impact was due in part to the magnetic personalities of its Brahman messengers, and partly to its teachings. The Brethren enjoined their followers to reject all formal church leadership and taught that religious experience was to be based solely on personal 'witness' and the authority of Scripture. Thus in this period when the state had allowed the near-collapse of the metranship, when Syrians were being shunned as ritually polluting by Malayali caste Hindus, and when virtually all the Syrians' churches and confessional groupings were searching for leadership from all manner of European and west Asian sources, the Plymouth Brethren offered a radical solution to the problem of fragmentation and disputed church authority. They encouraged the St Thomas Christians to repudiate all priests, bishops and missionaries and, in anticipation of Christ's Second Coming, to constitute themselves into independent local bodies of lay devotees.<sup>65</sup>

Few of these separatist groups and splinter churches survived for more than a few months at a time, and most of the Plymouth Brethren's Syrian adherents seem to have drifted into various other church affiliations by the late 1870s. Even so the appearance of these groups and teachers shows how volatile the Syrians had become, and how eager they were to embrace some kind of prophetic reformulation of Christianity which offered to cut through the whole conundrum of contested leadership and confessional affiliation.<sup>66</sup>

This is why so many Syrians responded to guru-like cult leaders and charismatic teachers in the mid to late nineteenth century, a move which was in sharp contrast to the evolution of Christianity in the Tamil hinterland. As chapter 8 will show, in much of southern Tamilnad the groups who eventually came to be thought of as Christian converts had

<sup>65</sup> Proceedings of Missionary Conferences of the Travancore-Cochin Mission (CMS 1857-67)/vol. CMS 39/ICHA; *CM Record* 1874, p. 94.

<sup>66</sup> As of 1873, some 5,000 Syrians in at least twenty-two localities were said to have joined these prophetic or millenarian splinter sects. *Ibid.* 1869, pp. 304-5; 1870, p. 329; 1873, pp. 164-6; 1874, pp. 92-2.

begun with a tradition of informal sect-based Christianity which was then replaced with a more highly organised and centralised church structure. By the later nineteenth century the Syrian Christians were beginning to move in exactly the opposite direction: their formal church leadership was in disarray, and they were turning instead to individual Christian guru figures who had much in common with the seventeenth-century holy men and church-builders of the Tamil hinterland.

In addition to the Plymouth Brethren Brahmans, many other key nineteenth-century Syrian personalities such as the Palakunnathu 'reformers' and the Syrian Catholic campaigners from Kuravilanath were figures who had at least some claim to be placed within this category of magnetic guru-like spiritual leaders. But of all these individuals there is one Keralan Christian sect leader who stands out from the others. This was the self-proclaimed prophet and guru known as Vidwankutti, a title meaning 'learned youth'. Vidwankutti was another Tamil Brahman with long-standing missionary connections: his family were among the many Brahman ritualists and service people recruited from southern Tamilnad by the eighteenth-century rajas of Travancore, and the 'learned youth' himself had been educated at the CMS mission's most prestigious teaching institution. In 1861 Vidwankutti declared himself a formal convert to Christianity, together with his parents and five younger brothers. The conversion of a learned Brahman family was a rare coup for the CMS, and the story was recounted in the missionary journals as a triumph of evangelical proselytising.<sup>67</sup> Four years later the 'learned youth' delighted his CMS patrons by taking ordination as an Anglican priest and, as the Rev. Justus Joseph, he was made pastor of a CMS church at Kannit in northern Travancore. The new clergyman was a personality of great power and magnetism. He was soon famous in Travancore and Cochin for his ecstatic hymn-singing, his impassioned evangelical sermons and his power to inspire and galvanise great crowds of devotees.<sup>68</sup>

All this was typical of the career of a conventional south Indian-born missionary evangelist, but Joseph soon parted company with mainstream Protestant Christianity. In 1874 he announced that one of his Syrian followers had a dream which he alone could interpret. The dream was a prophesy of the second coming of Christ, and Joseph declared that he had been commissioned by God to prepare mankind for the imminent Millennium. To the growing alarm of the CMS, Joseph began to issue more

<sup>67</sup> *CM Record* 1862, pp. 285–8.

<sup>68</sup> *CM Record* 1863, p. 273; 1874, pp. 92–4; 1875, pp. 162–3; 1877, pp. 59–60; interviews: Trivandrum, Cochin, Kottayam, May 1976.

prophecies, all of them based on the eschatological visions and pronouncements which were uttered during the trances of his Syrian medium. This time the Syrians were offered something more original than a local variant of the Plymouth Brethren's Christianity. Many features of Joseph's movement, including the symbiotic relationship with a divinely-inspired channel or medium, invite comparison with nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries millenarian movements in other parts of Asia, and with the prophetic spirit churches of southern Africa.<sup>69</sup> Like other chiliastic and eschatological prophets, Joseph eventually proclaimed the date on which Christ would descend to earth to subdue Satan and rule for 1,000 years over all his faithful. Those who followed Joseph's teachings would be sharers in the promised kingdom; deliverance was to come exactly 2,331 days from the 17 May 1875 when a terrible darkness would cover the world and signal 'the coming of the great King, Jesus of Nazereth, in fiery clouds'. From this point there was no question of an accommodation with the CMS. Joseph and his followers 'seceded' from the Anglican church, and transformed themselves into an independent sectarian movement which was focused on the magnetic personality of the group's founder and guru.<sup>70</sup>

The missionaries and south India's vernacular and English-language press gave much attention to these events. Much was published about the dramatic gatherings at which the master's devotees sang and danced and proclaimed the coming Millenium in the secret 'celestial language' invented by Vidwankutti. At the movement's peak as many as 12,000 Malayalis were said to have placed themselves under Joseph's charismatic authority. Most of these adherents were CMS, Mar Thomite and Jacobite Syrians from north and central Travancore, and a smaller group of Hindus from modestly prosperous artisan, trading and agricultural caste groups. Because his devotees had a little more than six years to prepare themselves for the impending reign of the Messiah they were referred to as the 'Six Years Men', and also as the Yuyomayan movement. This term derived from the initial letters 'Yu' of Jehovah in Malayalam, and the

<sup>69</sup> Franz Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion. History and Documents* (3 vols., Seattle and London, 1966-71), I, pp. 21-37; B.G.M. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, 2nd edn (London, 1961); Sundkler, *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists* (London, 1976).

<sup>70</sup> The CMS authorities tried to rationalise this unwelcome transformation in the career of their star convert; they claimed that 'the extraordinary behaviour of Mr Joseph was partly due to mental aberration brought on by excessive fasting and continued and undue religious excitement'. CMS Minute of Nov. 1875, quoted in Hunt, *The Anglican Church in Travancore*, p. 163. See *CM Record* 1866, pp. 328-9; 1868, p. 300; 1877, pp. 29-33. Also *Kerala Mitram* newspaper 15 Oct. 1881, MNNR; Nagam Aiya, *Manual*, II, pp. 130-4; K.K. Kuruvilla, *A History of the Mar Thoma Church and its Doctrines* (Madras, 1951), pp. 43-46.

initial letters of his own name Joseph. Somewhat later Vidwankutti said he had been directed by the Holy Spirit to change his name to Yuyoralison, a combination of Jehovah, Joseph, Rama, Ali and Wilson (the noted Anglican evangelical Daniel Wilson (1778–1858), fifth Bishop of Calcutta). The point of the change was to show that ‘God who was known by different names in different religions had taken unified shape [in his person] and that all distinctions of race and caste were abolished in him’.<sup>71</sup>

With its veneration of a guru with divine attributes, and its theme of anti-caste devotionism, the movement clearly drew on the tradition of the south Indian bhakti sects. There was also a strong emphasis on purity and physical containment. Having stripped themselves of their material possessions, Joseph’s followers formed into an egalitarian brotherhood of believers pledged to vegetarianism, teetotalism, the control of sexual passions and the rejection of ornaments and bodily adornment.<sup>72</sup>

It is evident that the sect’s followers were responding to two of the key trends in south Indian religious life in this period. The master’s insistence on purity and vegetarianism was in keeping with the move which many Malayalis (especially newly prosperous artisans and commercial people) were making towards the adoption of a more Brahmanical or ‘Sanskritic’ lifestyle. At the same time the Yuyomayans’ asceticism and renunciation of formal church ritual placed them in the tradition of south India’s equally widespread reaction against hierarchy and opulent religion. While the movement survived the Yuyomayans displayed a striking capacity to move back and forth between these two poles. The resulting synthesis was short-lived, but for a time it had great appeal for large numbers of Malayalis, Hindus as well as Christians.<sup>73</sup>

The collapse began on the day predicted for the Second Coming, 2 October 1881. Thousands of devotees assembled with their torches to welcome the Messiah; when the great darkness failed to overtake southern Kerala all but a handful of Yuyomayans renounced the master and attached themselves to the region’s other churches and sectarian groups. As far as the Syrians are concerned, the Yuyomayan episode illustrates the instability of the group’s social life in this period, as well as the volatility of their religious affiliations. It also shows how readily they could adapt mainline missionary teachings to suit their quest for a radical

<sup>71</sup> Kuruvilla, *Mar Thoma*, pp. 43–6; *Kerala Mitram* 15 Oct. 1881, MNNR.

<sup>72</sup> *Kerala Mitram* 15 Oct. 1881, MNNR.

<sup>73</sup> Joseph’s defence of vegetarianism combined Christian and Brahmanical Hindu thinking. He said that man before the Fall was a non-meat-eater. He was then degraded to carnivore status; now his salvation was at hand through the blood of Christ, and so he must cease to shed the blood of animals. Kuruvilla, *Mar Thoma*, p. 45.

new creed which might solve their chronic problems of authority and spiritual leadership.<sup>74</sup>

It is notable that at least two of the most widespread Syrian separatist sectarian movements were built up around the personalities of charismatic Brahman converts. In part their Syrian followers were transferring to Vidwankutti and the Plymouth Brethren Brahmans the same enraptured reverence which they had long shown to Christian monks and bishops from west Asia. This meant that there were features of the nineteenth-century wildfire sects which derived from the Syrians' own established religious traditions. The style and vocabulary had changed through the group's exposure to the European evangelicals, but the new cult leaders still had much in common with the overseas Christian hero-prelates who were revered as miracle-working cult saints after their deaths.

At the same time the influence of south Indian bhakti was very strong amongst these groups, especially in the teachings of the Yuyomayans. As the next chapter will show, the seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries who worked in Tamilnad had consciously employed the language of the Hindu devotional sects. The Jesuit Robert de Nobili was identified as a guru, and his Christian message was proclaimed as a new *margam* or path to enlightenment. Justus Joseph simply took this to its logical conclusion. In Vaishnavite bhakti the guru was revered as the god himself imparting the body of esoteric knowledge through which his devotees would attain salvation. As the source of his salvationist *margam* the Yuyomayan leader united every divinity and divine teacher in his person – the Vaishnavite Rama, Ali the Muslim hero, the Christian Joseph and, rather more prosaically, the evangelical missionary bishop Daniel Wilson.

Finally, it should be seen that Vidwankutti and the other nineteenth-century teachers were still thought of as holy men who retained their Brahman identity despite their conversion to Christianity. As a result the movements took some of their momentum from the Syrians' nineteenth-century Brahmanising trend, with its move towards vegetarianism and Brahmanical standards of ritual purity. This was a trend affecting many middling and upwardly mobile caste groups in south India, Hindu as well as Christian. For the Syrians it was a way of denying the claim that they were of inferior 'avarna' caste standing. The implication then is that the groups' Syrian devotees were ascribing additional power and magnetism to these charismatic Christian gurus because they were Brahmans, and therefore men of peculiar and ambiguous status in south Indian society.

<sup>74</sup> The 1901 Census listed 1,051 followers of the sect. Vidwankutti is supposed to have told his disappointed followers that the darkness really had fallen but they had been too wicked or too lacking in faith to perceive it. *Census of India 1901*, XXVI; Travancore, Report.

In some parts of south India, the increased diffusion of Brahmanical values and the in-migration of privileged Brahman service and priestly communities gave rise to various forms of local anti-Brahman protest during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>75</sup> This makes the Keralan chiliastic movements particularly interesting: the perception of Brahmans as beings in touch with forces which were dangerous and volatile as well as necessary and beneficent was shared very widely across the south. Arguably it was this ambivalence which was tapped and articulated by the ideologues of political and cultural 'non-Brahmanism'. At the same time there were other groups who were able to assimilate and build on their contacts with in-coming Brahmans. In the case of the Yuyomayans, the result was a bhakti-style eschatological movement which seems to have combined some sense of the power and menace of Brahmanical forces with the notion of enhanced rank and status which was to be acquired through the adoption of a purified 'Sanskritic' lifestyle.

### **Tactical mass conversions**

The proliferation of wildfire sects and breakaway churches was far from being the only sign of the Syrians' instability at this time. Soon after the failure of the Yuyomayans' millenarian prophesies, this story of fragmentation took a new turn when the Palakkunathu claimant Mar Thomas Athanasius (successor to the evangelical 'reformer' Mar Mathew) finally lost out in the long-running battle for the metranship. In 1888 the Travancore High Court made a series of title rulings in favour of the Jacobites' Pulikot metran Mar Dionysius V, and it was at this point that the losers formed into a separate ecclesiastical body, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. These events triggered off a new series of court cases as the two denominations fought over the division of their remaining properties and then moved on to further clashes over the issue of whether Mar Thomas's followers were to be allowed to build churches of their own on sites near existing Jacobite shrines.<sup>76</sup>

All this tension was in addition to the battles which were now being waged between Hindus and Syrians. In localities throughout Kerala, both Catholic and non-Catholic Syrians were being regularly excluded from Hindu temple rites. Hindu officials were stopping the building of Syrian churches on sites near Hindu temples and procession streets; in one

<sup>75</sup> Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology. Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (Cambridge, 1985); Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in Tamilnad* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969).

<sup>76</sup> Resident to Dewan/9 Oct. 1890/Cover file 2381/TGER.

celebrated case there was an attempt to halt the construction of a church because it was said to be too close to the reputed birthplace of the Hindu sage Sankaracarya. There were also mob attacks on St Thomas Christians who tried to affirm their savarna or clean-caste status by approaching Hindu temples. These clashes spawned a new class of court cases involving Syrians. The Christians were invariably charged with provoking the affrays, and Hindu officials even took the once unthinkable step of fining and imprisoning Syrians for the offense of polluting Hindu sacred precincts.<sup>77</sup>

From the late 1880s, religious festivals in centres with large Syrian and caste Hindu populations became occasions for fierce Hindu-Christian rioting. These clashes followed a pattern which was typical of Hindu-Muslim communal outbreaks in north India. They tended to be at their worst when Syrian and Hindu festivals coincided, and they often blew up during disputes over the routing of processions and the playing of music near the rival community's shrines. One of the worst took place in 1891, which was a year when the Christians' Easter celebrations coincided with the bawdy and exuberant Malabar Puram festival. In towns such as Shertallai, home of the Parayil Tharakons and many other Syrian Catholic families who had once held high honours in the Travancore court honours system, these celebrations had long since ceased to be occasions for the sharing of rites and regalia, and they now provided a focus for the expression of exclusive communal identities.

This was certainly the way in which the Syrians had come to portray themselves in appeals and petitions intended for Travancore's British-appointed chief minister and his European-style courts. In these Shertallai clashes, the Christian complainants sought to distance themselves as much as possible from the world of the rowdy 'heathen' festival celebrations in which they had once played an active role. In one typical petition, which was produced after the 1891 Puram riots, a Romo-Syrian katanar (priest) blamed the outbreaks on a group of Nayars who, it was said,

very unjustly not only vociferated the most obscene songs highly disgusting and shocking to the ears of anyone who has the least touch of moral principle, at a time when respectable females and others were assembling at the church for evening

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*; letters to Dewan from Coadjutor to Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly/28 Nov. 1886, 23 May 1887/Cover file 3153/TGER. Archbishop of Verapoly to Dewan/3 Oct. 1888/Cover file 872/TGER; Petition from Fr. Jacob, 'Chingavanum' katanar/18 April 1890/Cover file 873; Telegram from protesting Hindu landholders/Oct. 1895/Cover file 798/TGER; Mar Athanasius to Dewan/9 Mar. 1891/Cover file 799; petition of Oct. 1892/Cover file 791/TGER; Romo-Syrian petitions from Kaladi and other localities in Alengad taluk/4 Nov. 1884, 26 May 1885/Cover file 877/TGER.

services, – it being Lent days, being blind to decorum and morality due to intoxication, but also took a delight in insulting the weaker sex by surrounding them in shameless costumes with mimicing gestures, and singing vulgar songs most offensive to a sense of decency and delicacy.<sup>78</sup>

These conflicts served to deepen the St Thomas Christians' internal cleavages and to firm up the boundaries which now divided the group from the region's caste Hindus. The paradox here is that this process of separation worked to transform the Syrians into the kind of community that has often been thought of as a 'traditional' feature of Indian society. This was a trend which had its roots in the collapse and disintegration of the eighteenth-century political order in Kerala and was certainly not a consequence of economic and social 'modernisation'. Even so, it completely transformed the group's position in Keralan society. For the first time the Syrians were behaving according to notions of fixed communal interest; they were withdrawing or being excluded from Hindu ritual, and they were confronting Hindu caste groups across a widening religious and communal gulf.

At the same time, the Hindu-Christian tensions of the late nineteenth century added extra urgency to the Syrians' struggle for success in the law courts. Whether they were fighting about control of church treasuries or appealing against convictions in riot cases, the leaders of all the group's denominations soon discovered that they were likelier to be heard sympathetically if they could claim to represent confessional groups which were dynamic, forward-looking and committed to 'progressive' social action. The result of this was that towards the end of the nineteenth century every one of the main Syrian denominations began to make vigorous shows of involvement in the 'uplift' of low-caste and untouchable Hindus. Between 1888 and 1892 the Mar Thomites, the metran's Jacobites and the Syrian Catholics all founded so-called Evangelical Societies which sought out potential Pulaya, Ezhava and Cheruma converts, built schools and chapels for them and staged highly publicised mass baptisms for the groups' new protégés.<sup>79</sup>

It was this move which signified the final demise of Syrian 'integration'

<sup>78</sup> This was one of the many Hindu festivals featuring bawdy songs and rowdy horseplay. Petition to Dewan from Fr Joseph of Shertallai, 22 Mar. 1891/Cover file 1616/TGER. See also petition of 28 Feb. 1886/Cover file 1006/TGER.

<sup>79</sup> 'Syrian Church Case' correspondence, especially petitions to Dewan 12 Aug. 1889, 14 Sept. 1889 and 31 Aug. 1889/Cover file 3787/TGER; and 31 Aug. 1889/Cover file 2381/TGER; *Malayala Manorama* newspaper: 22 Mar. 1890; 6 June 1890; 15 Oct. 1892; 30 July 1892; 6 May 1893; *Edavaka Patrika* newspaper: 1:7 (1892); 1:3 (1892); 2:6 (1893); 5:6 (1896); 6:7 (1897).

within Keralan Hindu society. Gone were the days when the St Thomas Christians had prized their role in Hindu festivals and had greeted with horror any suggestions that they might be identified with the region's avarna or low-caste Christian converts. Now their priests and eminent landholders toured Hindu festivals denouncing 'heathen idolatry' and competing energetically to win over more low-caste 'neophytes' than their rivals in other Syrian denominations. For the Syrian Catholics as well as the Mar Thomites and the metran's Jacobites, there was nothing more to be gained by attempting to retain high-caste rank in Hindu society. The great need now was for the group's warring sects and churches to show up rival Syrian confessional groupings, to prove to the courts and the civil authorities that they were more energetic than their competitors and that they and not their opponents were expanding numerically and thus had a greater entitlement to church properties or the right to build churches on disputed sites.

What is so striking about these mass 'conversions' is that they were undertaken for purely tactical reasons. Most of the 'converts' were members of dependent labouring groups who had long-standing service ties to Syrian landholders. The conversion campaigns provided a means to assert a new form of supermacy over tenants and client labourers at a time when 'traditional' service ties were being undermined by the changing economic situation. On the Syrian side the measure of success in these campaigns was courtroom victories and claims of numerical advantage: there was no sudden outburst of evangelical zeal and egalitarian idealism. As far as the St Thomas Christians were concerned the new converts had not undergone any transformation in status or identity by virtue of their conversion. After baptism the low-caste Christians were all hived off into separate churches of their own, and there was never any question of allowing them to dine, worship or intermarry with their Syrian sponsors.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, like so many other nineteenth-century Christian converts, these baptised Pulayas and Ezhavas did not see their new affiliation as a long-term commitment. Once the major court cases were settled the campaign lost its momentum: a large proportion of the original 'neophytes' moved into other Christian groupings or dropped their Christian association altogether. For those who did retain their new affiliations, even sixty or seventy years later there were still strong barriers between high-ranking old Syrians and low-caste converts from this late-nineteenth-century 'evangelical' movement.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Ninan Koshy, *Caste in the Keralan Churches* (Bangalore, 1968), pp. 24–5, 32–53.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

This strategy of tactical conversion made for some very odd bed-fellows. After the Mar Thomites founded the first of the Syrians' evangelical associations, the Jacobite metran realised that he would have to find a means to trump his rivals and prove that he too was the leader of an active and expanding church. The Jacobites soon launched their own campaign of low-caste baptisms, but their first exercise in strategic numbers-building involved an alliance with two of south India's oddest and most colourful religious leaders, the renegade clerics Luis Mariano Soares (c. 1858–1903) and Antonio Francisco-Xavier Alvarez (1837–95). Soares was a near-illiterate Eurasian from Goa who had been excommunicated by the Padroado church authorities in the mid-1870s. By about 1895 he and his fellow Goan Alvarez conceived the idea of founding their own miniature breakaway church, and Alvarez, who seems to have been an ex-seminarian, carried out an ordination rite for his partner. In 1887 Alvarez and Soares set up operations in Colombo, which became the headquarters of their grandly named Independent Catholic Church of Ceylon, Goa and India.<sup>82</sup>

Over the next twelve years these self-styled churchmen toured Christian localities all over south India and received much sympathetic coverage in the Tamil and Malayalam press. Naturally enough their claim to possess the authority to dispense the sacraments was fiercely attacked by the region's Roman Catholic church authorities, but the effect of this was actually to enhance their power to attract large numbers of Tamil and Malayali Christians. For this growing body of supporters the official church's charges of fraud and heresy were taken as signs that Alvarez and Soares really were men of God who had cast off the shackles of institutional religion and could therefore be identified with the region's charismatic cult saints and sectarian gurus. What the two clerics were able to offer, then, was an alternative form of endorsement to south Indian Christians who were fighting their own priests and missionaries over matters of church discipline and ceremonial precedence. Because of their claim to be authentic priests with a priest's power to dispense the sacraments, they could offer their adherents a unique chance to defy their own priests and missionaries without running the risks which usually accompanied this kind of defiance, that is the risk of excommunication and the loss of all the domestic and corporate rituals which only a priest could perform.<sup>83</sup>

In 1888, soon after the two Goans had founded their fast-growing

<sup>82</sup> Agur, *Church History*, pp. 404–9.

<sup>83</sup> For press coverage of Alvarez and Soares, see e.g. *Edavaka Patrika* 1:4 (1892); 1:5 (1892) and *Malayala Manorama* 6 May 1892.

breakaway church, the Jacobite metran and three of his leading clerics sailed to Colombo and performed an elaborate rite of consecration for Alvares. To the fury of the Roman Catholic missionary establishment, the Malayali prelates granted this Goan Catholic excommunicate the Syriac episcopal title Mar Julius I and proclaimed him Metropolitan of the Independent Catholic Church of Goa, Ceylon and India.<sup>84</sup> This was a great coup for Alvares. Whoever administered it, consecration was an act of great potency for all Indian Christians, and the new 'Mar Julius' drove the message home by parading in episcopal robes through the Christian localities of Ceylon and south India.<sup>85</sup> Since he had received his new office at the hands of a perfectly legitimate Christian bishop it was now very much more difficult for the Catholic authorities to dismiss him as a fraud and a heretic; he and his church gained immensely from the metran's endorsement. The Jacobites also benefited from this new link. Alvares had had no previous ancestral or ecclesiastical ties to the Keralan Christian communities, and his 'church' was composed of several thousand dissident Tamil Christians. Most of these were recently converted Shanars (low-ranking palmyra cultivators and petty traders) and a growing number of Paravas and Mukkuvas (Roman Catholic fishermen and maritime trading people) whose low caste standing would once have debarred them from any ties with the Syrians. Now, though, these considerations weighed much less heavily than before. What mattered at this point was the need to demonstrate that the Jacobites were as dynamic and expansive as their rivals, and so they portrayed the move as a sign of their metran's stature. The point as the Jacobite leadership saw it was that their chief cleric was a man in demand, a leader who was sought out and deferred to for his power to dispense validation to other churchmen. The link with Alvares therefore proved that the whole church was in a state of buoyancy, that it was reaching out and winning new affiliates across the whole of south India and even overseas.<sup>86</sup>

Like the Syrians' conversion campaigns amongst low-caste Malayalis, this move too was described in the press and in petitions to state officials as a product of evangelical zeal and a new-found spirit of social activism amongst the St Thomas Christians. Paravas, Mukkuvas and Shanars all over southern Tamilnad began to attach themselves to Alvares's independent church; as chapter 9 will show, the new affiliation was used

<sup>84</sup> *Malaya Manorama* 6 May 1892. Dt. Magistrate to Dewan/19 July 1895:555; Petit. from Mar Dionysius V to Trivandrum Dewan Peishcar/2 June 1896/Cover file 880/TGER. See also Agur, *Church History*, pp. 367, 404–6.

<sup>85</sup> *Edavaka Patrika* 1:4 (1892), pp. 55–7.

<sup>86</sup> On Alvares's links with Tamil fishing and trading people, see below, pp. 375, 449–50.

as a bargaining counter in local status disputes and conflicts with priests and missionaries. Once Alvarez had acquired his St Thomas Christian episcopal title, these low-caste Tamil dissidents began describing themselves as Syrian Christians and demanding tokens of enhanced caste rank and status on the basis of this supposed shift in identity. Far from denying these assertions the Jacobite metran saw that the new 'conversions' could be cited as evidence of his church's dynamism and vitality. Over the next ten years he made a great show of patronage towards these self-proclaimed Tamil 'Syrians'. In one of many such moves in this period, fifty Parava fishing families from Kanniyakumari renounced the authority of the Jesuits and declared their allegiance to 'Mar Julius' and his church. The metran appealed to the Travancore authorities on their behalf and insisted that the group 'were to be considered as my own flock and I take much interest and warm care in their welfare'.<sup>87</sup>

The metran also continued to seek out new would-be bishops to consecrate. Here too the cleric's actual status and origins were of little significance; what mattered was the chance to build up his own prestige by incorporating new affiliates and making yet more displays of his sacred power and authority. In 1892 the metran and two of his prelates travelled to Colombo once again to consecrate one of Alvarez's more dubious associates, a French army deserter and failed seminarian named Joseph René Vilatte (1854–1929). During his varied and enterprising career Vilatte had professed affiliation to the American Episcopalian hierarchy, the Russian Orthodox episcopate of Alaska, the American Presbyterian church, and the 'Old Catholic' breakaway sect based in Switzerland. In 1884 he settled in Wisconsin, USA and asserted his authority over a few hundred of the region's French-speaking rural immigrants. He too was motivated by a need to claim validation as a legitimately consecrated bishop. Vilatte's consecration ceremony was covered extensively in the Malayalam press, and the metran equipped him with a supply of sacred muron (holy oil) to take back to his flock of farmers and fur trappers.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>87</sup> This was in 1895–6. None of these attachments lasted for more than a few months at a time: when they failed to gain additional 'honours' such groups invariably dropped their adherence to Alvarez and moved on to new sources of advocacy. See petition from Mar Dionysius V to Trivandrum Dewan Peishcar/2 June 1896, and petition from 'Parava Christians of C. Comorin in S. Travancore'/21 Feb. 1896/Cover file 880/TGER; interviews with descendants of Alvarez's Kanniyakumari adherents, Aug. 1977. Local Paravas can still point out the site of the old 'Alvarez church' in Kanniyakumari.

<sup>88</sup> *Edavaka Patrika* 1:5 (1892); *Malayala Manorama* 6 May 1892; Peter F. Anson, *Bishops at Large* (London, 1962), pp. 93–129; Agur, *Church History*, pp. 409–10; Henry T. Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes and the Anglican Church*, 2nd edn (London, 1961), pp. 47–69.

The Jacobite metrans was not the only Syrian church leader to seek credibility in the eyes of the courts and the civil authorities in this way. In 1889, Alvarez's associate Soares was consecrated as an Independent Catholic Church bishop with the title Mar Basilius I. In this case the consecration was performed by a Syrian Catholic prelate in search of his own convincing constituency. This prelate had earlier assumed control of one of the smaller Syrian breakaway sects based in Trichur. In a move which shows how widely the Syrians were willing to cast the net at this point in their quest for viable spiritual leadership and authority, in 1900 this Trichur breakaway group installed Mar Basilius (Soares) as the new head of their church in succession to their own chief prelate Mar Abdiso. This meant that this group of Syrians was willing to accept the spiritual supremacy of an illiterate Eurasian from Goa – born a Roman Catholic – and consecrated a bishop of an entirely separate Tamil dissident church.<sup>89</sup>

### Conclusion

The Syrians were a group who came to be recognised as fully 'integrated' members of Kerala's distinctive moral and political order. This sense of integration broke down very rapidly with the collapse of the region's indigenous state system at the end of the eighteenth century, but until this collapse occurred the Syrians shared fully in the ceremonial schemes of ranked temple 'honours' which distinguished high or savarna groups from those of low or avarna caste standing. The group's special status as a fully 'indigenised' Christian community in Malabar has been explained in terms of the supposed persistence of caste-based ideas and affinities among them; alternatively, it has been assumed that the group was uniquely prone to religious and cultural 'syncretism' in its customs and ideology. Now it is possible to be much more precise about the nature of these syncretic values and institutions, particularly as regards the interpenetration of the Syrians' Christian cult traditions with the beliefs and practices of the region's warrior goddess and military cult traditions. This did not necessarily involve a simple process of assimilation: in many cases there was a relationship of confrontation and conflict between the two, but this still created an area of community with the region's high-ranking non-Christian groups.

<sup>89</sup> Mar Abdiso who consecrated Soares was the Malayali malpan who had formed an independent breakaway sect from among the followers of the west Asian Nestorian prelate Mar Elias Mellus. Anson, *Bishops at Large*, p. 133; Mackenzie, 'History of Christianity', p. 200.

How far does all this apply to the Christian convert communities of south India, that is to the groups who adopted Christianity at a much more recent date as clients of the European colonial powers? The next chapter will move on to the Tamil-speaking Parava population of the southeast coast, a far more conventional Roman Catholic convert group in terms of their personal names, their religious practices and their relationships with European missionary organisations. Nevertheless as chapter 9 will show, the Paravas also replicated many aspects of Hindu social structure, not as a residue or accidental accretion from their 'pagan' past, but as a positive and dynamic force in their worship and social organisation. At a more abstract level than in the case of the Syrians, the religious life of these Tamil converts can be related to indigenous Hindu concepts of divinity and sacred power. For long periods of their history, particularly during the absence of Jesuit missionaries from their home territory from 1773 to 1837, they practised an equally vital and influential form of indigenous south Indian Christianity, and were not simply a passive product of European colonial evangelising.

## *The Christian Paravas of southern Tamilnad*

### Introduction

The Tamil Paravas are another of south India's maritime groups, but unlike the Syrians, they did not originate as a high-ranking service and trading community with a tradition of west Asian descent and migration. Instead the Paravas were once part of the low-ranking fishing and boat-handling population of the south Indian coastline, and they adopted Christianity as clients of the Portuguese colonial authorities. As a result the Paravas can be grouped with the Tamil-speaking Muslim weavers, fishermen and traders of the Coromandel coast, and with the region's Tamil and Malayali-speaking Mukkuvas, most of whom also became Christian converts during the colonial period. Unlike these other maritime caste groups though, many of the people who came to be known as Paravas were able to move into more lucrative and prestigious occupations. By the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the group had thrown up a powerful élite of maritime trading clans. This new wealth and the opulent caste lifestyle which it supported created a marked distinction between the Paravas and the poor and relatively homogeneous fishing communities of Malabar, Andhra Pradesh and the northern Tamil coast.<sup>1</sup> So what did 'conversion' mean for such people, and what was the relationship between them and the surrounding society?

The Paravas owed their rise to an accident of geography. Their original homeland was the strip of coastline which runs along the Gulf of Mannar from southern Ramnad to the extreme tip of the Coromandel coast. This meant that unlike other south Indian fishing people, the Paravas were in a position to exploit one of the region's great natural resources, the

<sup>1</sup> The Mukkuvas are found along the coast between Kanniyakumari and Trivandrum: they did not produce a population of rich traders. The Sri Lankan Karava are a group with marked similarities to the Parava. See Michael Roberts, *Caste Conflict and Elite Formation. The Rise of a Karava Elite in Sri Lanka, 1500-1931* (Cambridge, 1982). And see V. Govindan, *Fishery Statistics and Information, West and East Coasts, Madras Presidency*. Madras Fisheries Bureau. Bulletin No. 9 (Madras, 1916), pp. 45-62, 121-40.

celebrated pearl-bearing oyster beds which lie offshore between Tirunelveli and Ramnad and the northwest coast of Ceylon.<sup>2</sup> Both pearling and its associated trade of chank or conch-shell diving were important south Indian export industries as early as the first century AD. Pearl fishing was the most lucrative of the maritime trades, but the Gulf of Maanar's chank (or conch) fisheries also became an important resource for the pre-colonial rulers of southern Tamilnad. As emblems of Lord Siva, conch shells have been prized by Hindus since ancient times, and they were also a staple of Bengal's once-thriving bangle carving industry.<sup>3</sup> But what really set these trades apart was the high level of skill and specialist knowledge involved in chank and pearl fishing. Chank diving often served as a cover for illicit pearling operations, and pearl fishing itself required a command of much arcane information concerning the location and tending of the region's pearl oyster beds. Naturally enough this expertise was acquired by the region's fishing communities, and at the time of the great pre-colonial kingdoms these included the fishermen of Kilakkarai, Kayalpatanam and the other Muslim centres of Ramnad and Tirunelveli, and the non-Muslim Paravas who ultimately converted to Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

Like fishing itself, pearling and chank diving were regarded as low and ritually polluting occupations, but this did not stop these groups from using their specialities as a bridge to more prestigious commercial activities. At an early period many of the Tamil country's coastal Muslims moved into shipping and gem dealing from more humble beginnings in the diving industries; others moved up the ladder by establishing themselves as chank and pearl traders and boat-owners, controlling large populations of low-ranking Muslim divers.<sup>5</sup> The Parava trading families established themselves in much the same way; they too were able to diversify, and to assert their authority over ritually inferior fishing and diving people. Thus by the beginning of the eighteenth century the Tamil Paravas had emerged as one of south India's most highly organised specialist caste groups.

<sup>2</sup> For an early account of the Ceylon pearl fisheries see Stanley, ed., *Duarte Barbosa*, p. 170. And see James Stuart, *An Account of the Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon* (Colombo, 1843); James Hornell, *The Indian Pearl Fisheries of the Gulf of Manaar and Palk Bay* (Madras, 1922); S. Arunachalam, *The History of the Pearl Fishery of the Tamil Coast* (Annamalainagar, 1952). See also Patrick A. Roche, *Fishermen of the Coromandel Coast. A Study of the Paravas of the Coromandel* (New Delhi, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Hornell, *The Sacred Chank of India*.

<sup>4</sup> TCR vol. 7966/237/8 Oct. 1839; TCR vol. 7983/144/8 May 1856, TNA; Arunachalam, *History of the Pearl Fishery*; H.S. Thomas, *A Report on Pearl Fisheries and Chank Fisheries 1884* (Madras, 1884), IOL.

<sup>5</sup> Statements from Muslim 'headmen' and chank renters from Kilakkarai and other Muslim maritime towns: BOR vol. 556/18 Nov. 1811/60/pp. 11398-409/TNA.

This transformation began when the pre-colonial rulers of southern Tamilnad began to draw the south Indian diving groups into their local patronage networks. The mediaeval Pandya rulers recognised the importance of these local diving groups, and by the early sixteenth century the region's pearl fishers were being offered special patronage and honours by the rulers of Tamilnad's southernmost nayaka and poligar chiefdoms.<sup>6</sup> A similar process of incorporation was being used to link artisans, ritualists, military men and other specialists to the region's expansive new warrior regimes. To secure their collaboration, the new clients received privileges and recognition from their new overlord, and their 'elders' or caste notables were vested with new rights and titles. These exchanges of honour and service tended to firm up the recipients' sense of corporate identity. As a result, during this long period of regional 'caste formation', groups with some form of occupational speciality tended to become much more tightly knit and 'caste-like' than the region's farming and labouring groups.<sup>7</sup>

A large part of this Tamil maritime population had become Muslim by the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. The Muslims of Kilakkarai and Kayalpatanam were well known for their specialist diving skills, and a number of south Indian regimes sought to secure them as client pearl fishers. In the sixteenth century the nayaka rulers of Madurai forged links of this kind with the Muslims of Kayalpatanam. One of the town's élite trading magnates, a notable who became known as the Mudaliyar Pillai Maraikkayar, was endowed with 'kingly' honours by the seventeenth-century Madurai ruler Tirumalai Nayaka; he was also vested with authority over the local pearling population. As a result these Muslims became part of a complex patronage system which used local pearling revenues as a form of endowment for the region's major Hindu temples. The nayakas or their local chiefs and lieutenants guaranteed a set share of these revenues to the Mudaliyar Pillai Maraikkayar: he oversaw the collection of the remaining shares and these were then passed on to shrines such as the great shore temple at Tiruccentur. The rulers of Ramnad established similar connections with the Kilakkarai Muslims.

<sup>6</sup> On the early Pandya pearling trade see Nilakanta Sastri, *The Pandyan Kingdom*, pp. 35, 120. See also Marco Polo, pp. 292–3; Pate, *Tinnevely*, pp. 230–1; James Steuart, *Account of the Pearl Fisheries of Ceylon*; Hornell, *Indian Pearl Fisheries*, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> See Conlon, *A Caste in a Changing World*. D.A. Washbrook, 'The development of caste organisation in south India 1880–1925', in C.J. Baker and D.A. Washbrook, *South India. Political Institutions and Political Change 1880–1940* (Delhi, 1975), pp. 150–203. The strong caste institutions of some Telugu fishing groups are noted in BOR vol. 59/25 June 1792/10–11/pp. 2731–68/TNA.

Their prowess as divers helped to make the town a favoured recipient of patronage from the Setupatis.<sup>8</sup>

Non-Muslim pearling specialists were also recruited into these pre-colonial state patronage networks. This meant that long before their conversion to Christianity, the seafarers who eventually emerged as the tightly knit Roman Catholic Parava population had built up at least some sense of shared identity and affiliation. It is known, for example, that the caste title Parava was in use before the Portuguese arrived, and people who used the title appear to have been treated as a distinct community by the nayakas, and possibly by some of their Pandya predecessors. Like the Muslim seafarers who take pride in the rank and honours bestowed on the Mudali Pillai Maraikkayar, the Paravas claim that they too had high-ranking notables in the pre-colonial period. These office-holders are supposed to have remitted periodic levies to their Hindu overlords and were allowed to manage the pearl and chank fisheries (diving sessions) in return for set shares of the revenue.<sup>9</sup>

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Tamil coastline contained a chain of some twenty to thirty Parava localities stretching from Vembar near the border of the present-day Ramnad district to Kanniyakumari, and along a twenty-mile stretch of the southwest coast extending north from Kanniyakumari. (Tamil is the majority language along this coastal strip.) During the period of European colonial expansion the group's most powerful seaborne trading lineages came to be based in the colonial port town of Tuticorin (Tuttukkuti). In the seventeenth century Parava traders also began to spread inland to the Tamil temple towns and fort-mart centres: Madurai, Palaiyamkottai and several other inland localities contain Parava populations dating from this period. The Paravas probably numbered about 30 to 40,000 in 1800, 40 to 60,000 in 1860 and nearly 80,000 in 1900.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> 'Urzee' from Rani of Ramnad 30 Sept. 1811/BOR vol. 556/60/18 Nov. 1811/ pp. 11398–409/TNA. There is a seventeenth-century copper-plate grant which points to the nayakas' links with the Mudaliyar Pillai Maraikkayar. See Hornell, *Indian Pearl Fisheries*, p. 25; TCR vol. 7966/151/20 Oct. 1836, pp. 252–3/TNA. The title Mudaliyar Pillai Maraikkayar derives from the titles used by the region's élite Vellala landholding groups: here too, the region's high-ranking coastal Muslims had adopted status markers associated with élite Hindu groups.

<sup>9</sup> Hornell, *Indian Pearl Fisheries*, p. 12; Stephen C. Motha, *A Short History of the Jathithalaimai or the Chieftainship of the Bharathars* (Tuticorin, n.d. [1926?]). Bharatha[r] is a variant of Parava.

<sup>10</sup> These are estimates; there are no official Census figures for the Paravas. See Fr. Louis Verdier, S.J., 'Mémoire sur la caste des Paravers' Report dated Palamcottai [Palaiyamkottai] 24 May 1860 in *Lettres de la nouvelle mission du Maduré* (bound typescript vols.) vol. 1, pp. 83–110, MMA; *Madras Catholic Directory* for 1875, 1890, 1896; Pate, *Tinnevely*, p. 121. Parava migration is discussed in [Fr Adrian Caussanel] MS vol. 'Historical Notes – Tinnevely District', (n.d. [c. 1925]), pp. 21–37, MMA. This work, compiled by the Tirunelveli-based Jesuit Fr. Caussanel (1850–1930) was based on parish priests' diaries, district court records and mission correspondence.

Most of the Paravas' settlements are clustered along the shore at the fringes of more densely settled agricultural areas. These villages are inhabited solely by Paravas and are interspersed with separate localities inhabited by Muslim fishermen, traders and artisans. There is also a long-standing population of Tamil Shanars (now known as Nadars) living in separate hamlets near the coast. Most of these Shanar settlements are located in the bleak and arid sand-dune region known as the *teri*, which runs close to the more southerly Parava villages such as Manapad and Periyatalei. It will be remembered that these semi-specialised cultivators are well known as experts in the cultivation of palmyra trees and in the manufacture of palmyra products, especially 'toddy' or country liquor; they also became skilled in digging wells for the irrigation of so-called garden crops. In addition, there are usually Paraiyan *sēris* (hamlets) located at the outskirts of these settlements.

The Paravas' conversion to Christianity took place in the course of a savage maritime war fought between 1527 and 1539 by the Portuguese and the south Indian Muslim forces who were allied with the Zamorin of Calicut. In 1532 a delegation of seventy Paravas presented themselves at the Portuguese stronghold in Cochin and appealed for protection against the Tamil Muslim diving groups and the local rulers who supported them. These Paravas claimed that they were the victims of an age-old rivalry with the region's sea-going Muslims. In fact it is more likely that the conflict was of relatively recent origin, and that the Portuguese themselves provided the trigger when they intruded into the region's delicately balanced economic and political order. In any case the appeal had the desired effect. The Portuguese leapt at the chance to recruit a new client community possessing valuable maritime skills, and it was all the better that the group claimed to be involved in a struggle with the hated Muslim enemy. A party of Padroado clerics was sent off to the Tamil country, and within months they were reported to have baptised over 20,000 Paravas from at least thirty villages in the area which the Portuguese referred to as the 'fishery coast'.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Paravas' caste institutions were greatly strengthened through their association with the Portuguese, they seem to have possessed some form of institutionalised leadership before their conversion.

<sup>11</sup> Dale, *Islamic Society*, pp. 34–50; C.R. De Silva, 'The Portuguese and pearl fishing off south India and Sri Lanka', *South Asia* 1:1 (n.s.) (1978), pp. 14–28; Pate, *Tinnevelly*, pp. 230–1; Daniello Bartoli, *Dell'istoria della Compagnia di Gesu: L'Asia* (3 vols., Milan, 1831), 1, p. 49. On the Paravas' conversion, see Georg Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier. His Life, His Times*. Trans. M.J. Costelloe. (4 vols., Rome, 1977–82), II, pp. 260–6; Caldwell, *History of Tinnevelly*, p. 68; Simon Casie Chitty, 'Remarks on the origin and history of the Parawas', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1837), p. 132.

When the delegation sailed to Cochin they were led by a Parava notable known as the Vikirama Adita Pandyan. This figure was apparently a senior caste 'elder' or headman. His position was presumably much like that of the Muslim Mudaliyar Pillai Maraikkayar, and he may even have been referred to as *jāti talaivan*, 'head of the caste', the term which was used for the Paravas' hereditary chief notables for the next 400 years. Before the group moved their ceremonial headquarters to the new Portuguese trading centre of Tuticorin, the Vikirama Adita Pandyan made his home in the village of Virapandianpatanam. This was an old maritime centre with long-standing Pandya dynastic associations. Up to the time of the group's conversion, the locality had contained the Paravas' most important tutelary goddess shrine, and it continued to serve as a secondary headquarters for the group's caste notables even after the move to Tuticorin.<sup>12</sup> At the time of the group's conversion the Vikirama Adita Pandyan appears to have had authority over a set of lesser regional headmen and lineage chiefs. Throughout the colonial period the Paravas maintained a hierarchy of notables and title-holders known as *sittāttis*, *adappans*, *moupans* and *pattangattis*. These notables collected fees known as *kānikkai* from all the lesser-ranking Paravas in their localities: this system too had its origins in the pre-colonial period.

The use of the Tamil dynastic title Pandya suggests a claim of authority deriving from the region's early Hindu rajas. This would imply a process of incorporation and endorsement along the lines described above. A series of nineteenth-century caste histories which were compiled by Parava literary men and which were based on much older texts and oral sources explained the *jāti talaivan*'s origins in precisely this way. Furthermore the group's caste notables still maintain that the holders of this title once bore weapons, led their own armies (or at least had the right to set armed guards over the pearling zones) and were recognised as tribute-paying feudatories under the region's Hindu rajas.<sup>13</sup>

Thus like the Syrians' hereditary metrans or chief clerics, the figure known as the Vikirama Adita Pandyan or *jāti talaivan* came to be recognised as yet another example of the south Indian 'little king'. This is a development which can be observed across much of south India in this period. In many cases the region's Hindu kingdoms had conferred some

<sup>12</sup> *Milestones in Bharatha Progress: A Brief History of the Conference Movement*. Published on the Occasion of the Ninth Bharatha Conference held on the 7th, 8th, and 9th January 1938 (Colombo, 1938), p. 3. Doubts have been raised about the status of this notable, but the Paravas certainly came to believe in this tradition of the 'kingly' Vikirama Adita Pandyan. See Roche, *Fishermen of the Coromandel Coast*, pp. 54–9.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews, Madras, Tuticorin, Manapad: 1976, 1977, 1980; Hornell, *The Indian Pearl Fisheries*, p. 12.

form of endorsement on the designated headmen of these specialised caste groups. Even so, these were regions of loose and shifting political authority, and the southern coastal zone was particularly remote from the old nayaka capitals and the fort-mart centres of the poligars. Here then the pre-colonial kingdom could only operate as a validating authority, a source of titles and legitimation. Real power had come to be devolved onto the headmen of specialist occupational groups, that is on to figures like the Mudali Pillai Maraikkayar and the Vikirama Adita Pandya who held these 'kingly' titles, rather than being vested in local chiefs or rajas. In the course of time, Portuguese and Dutch attempts to control specialist labour in the area further enhanced the power of such headmen.

### **Caste notables and the cult tradition**

Even amongst the most specialised south Indian caste groups it is difficult to find a group which has possessed a stable system of leadership with a line of hereditary caste notables like that of the Paravas. It is even more unusual to encounter a set of caste headmen with the power to enforce a code of moral and professional conduct over an entire 'moral community', especially one which continued to do so over many generations. This is why it is so striking that the Paravas – all of whom remained professing Christians throughout the colonial period and up to the present day – developed a longer-lived and more cohesive caste identity than almost any other *jāti* in south India. The explanation lies in the group's relationship with their European patrons, and in the way in which their Christian customs and observances came to support and strengthen their organisation as a caste group possessing all the attributes which we now associate with 'traditional' south Asian castes.

Beginning with the Portuguese, the colonial authorities devised techniques of alliance-building which gave unprecedented strength and stability to the Paravas' caste institutions. These European powers realised that it would be far easier to cream off the profits of the pearl trade if they could build up the authority of the Paravas' caste 'elders' and notables. The advantages were as clear to the colonial powers as they were to the nayakas and poligars. With greater prestige and standing these title-holders would be in a better position to recruit and discipline Parava divers and to perform all the other specialised tasks which were required to keep the fisheries running efficiently. Furthermore if the Portuguese became the chief source of endorsement and validation for the Parava caste notables, then these pattangattis and other figures of authority could be enlisted as a local collaborating élite serving the interests of the Portuguese Estado da Índia.

It was through religious patronage that the Portuguese created these bonds of affiliation and clientage. The Padroado sent out its initial missionary expedition as soon as the Vikirama Pandyan swore an oath of allegiance to the Portuguese Crown. The great ceremonies of mass baptism which followed this move were really declarations of tactical alliance rather than religious conversions as the term is usually understood.<sup>14</sup> Ten years later, however, the famous Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier (1506–52) arrived in the region. Xavier, who was canonised in 1621, may have baptised or re-baptised as many as 15,000 Paravas and Mukkuvas during his three brief stays in south India, and it was largely through his efforts that these groups began to acquire elements of a recognisably Christian religious culture.<sup>15</sup>

Xavier's techniques were necessarily crude. Although he travelled with a small group of Goa-trained interpreters, he himself spoke little Tamil. There was no concept yet of borrowing indigenous words and phrases to make the missionary message more intelligible, so he and his assistants simply used the appropriate Portuguese terms to convey key Christian concepts such as heaven, grace, sacraments, baptism, priest and cross. His letters give a vivid picture of his daily round:

it often happens to me to be hardly able to use my hands from the fatigue of baptizing: often in a single day I have baptized whole villages. Sometimes I have lost my voice and strength altogether with repeating again and again the Credo and the other forms.

When I have done this and am going away, I leave in each place one copy of the Christian doctrine . . . Every feast day I bid them meet in one place and sing all together the elements of the faith. For this purpose I have appointed . . . men of intelligence and character who are to preside . . . and the Governor . . . has been good enough . . . to allot a yearly revenue of 4,000 gold *fanams* for the salary of these catechists.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously this was not 'conversion' as the term came to be used by later missionaries. But even at this stage, when the Paravas were simply being taught to make the sign of the cross and to recite garbled Tamil renderings of the Creed and the Ave Maria,<sup>17</sup> the group was still acquiring a new and distinctive tradition of worship. They can even be said to have acquired a new religious identity, although Xavier and his assistants could not possibly have 'converted' their hearers in the sense of wiping out their existing conception of the supernatural and introducing them to a new, standardised system of faith and worship.

<sup>14</sup> Georg Schurhammer, 'Letters of D. Joao da Cruz', *Kerala Society Papers*, 6 (1930), pp. 304–7.

<sup>15</sup> Schurhammer, *Xavier*, II, pp. 285–95.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 308; quotations Henry James Coleridge, ed., *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier* (2 vols., London, 1881), I, pp. 153, 155.

<sup>17</sup> Coleridge, *Letters*, I, pp. 151–3; Schurhammer, *Xavier*, II, pp. 308–9.

It was largely the force of Francis Xavier's own personality and the aura of charismatic authority which surrounded him which infused these mechanically learned rites and observances with a measure of coherence. Although he spent only two years in all in south India, Xavier became a powerful tutelary for the Paravas; in their hierarchy of regional patrons and cult figures he was second only to their most celebrated supernatural patron figure, the miraculous Virgin of Tuticorin. Here too then, a teacher and holy man had come from overseas to be drawn into a tradition of cult worship which concentrated on the wielding of power and the firming up of corporate affinities amongst communities of subject-devotees. In his own lifetime Xavier came to be revered as a healer and exorcist. He also became the focus of many posthumous legends and hagiographical traditions which focus on his power to heal the sick and reanimate the dead. In many of these accounts the motifs are almost identical to those found in the region's 'syncretic' Muslim devotional literature. Like the Penukonda pir, St Francis brings forth blossoms from a withered stick; he visits a woman undergoing a long and difficult labour, and when he touches her she immediately gives birth.<sup>18</sup>

All these accounts have much in common with conventional European hagiography. The Jesuits themselves circulated highly coloured descriptions of Xavier's life and times. This was part of their campaign to create a shared convention of faith and cult devotion among their new converts, and they naturally used the vocabulary and symbolism of existing Christian saint cult legends to build up the Xavier tradition. Nevertheless, as they circulated among Tamil devotees, the St Francis legends took on the characteristic features of Sufi tazkiras (saints' biographies) as well as accounts of the region's warrior cult divinities. This may not have been what the Jesuits intended, but the results are unmistakable. St Francis acquires the qualities of a guru and a Muslim holy man; he is a spiritual exemplar and an embodiment of divine power. The stories of his life focus on his physical ordeals. His sea journeys to Japan, India and the Moluccas and his walking tours through the Tamil fishing villages are recounted as tales of heroic austerities; they become conquests of spiritual obstacles like those achieved by the pirs and tantric adepts of south India.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Neill, *Christianity in India*, I, p. 147; Schurhammer, *Xavier*, II, pp. 344–6. On Xavier's powers of healing exorcism: see e.g. Schurhammer, *Xavier*, II, p. 459; Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, pp. 207–8.

<sup>19</sup> Versions of these stories are still common. One of the most popular Xavier shrines is located in the Parava village of Kottar. Here, like St Thomas, Xavier is supposed to have been seen as a figure bathed in radiance, kneeling in prayer while flames blazed round him. Since the seventeenth century this site has been associated with the curing of blindness and other afflictions; Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, pp. 207–8; letter from Fr. Peter Martin, 1 June 1700, in *Travels of the Jesuits into Various Parts of the World*, 2nd edn. (2 vols., London, 1762), I, p. 371.

Once Xavier was canonised the Jesuits were able to present him as a fully fledged supernatural intercessor: this in turn made it even easier for local worshippers to bridge the gap between Christian, Muslim and even Hindu saints and divinities. In 1700, a European Jesuit reported on a confrontation between a Parava caste notable and a Dutch *predikaant* (pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church). This account reflects a view of Francis Xavier which calls to mind the portrayal of Muslim pirs as figures who engage in supernatural contests against Hindu *yogis* (holy men). The Dutchman, Baldaeus, author of a well-known travel memoir, had attempted to proselytise among the Paravas: the Parava caste notable is said to have told the predikaant that if he expected to win the allegiance of the Paravas he must show that he possessed even stronger powers than Francis Xavier's. The Dutch missionary is told that St Francis had raised at least five people from the dead, and the Parava declares: 'So begin by bringing back to life at least a dozen dead people . . . cure all our sick people; make our sea richer in fish than it is at present; and when you have done this, it will be time to consider what reply to make to you.'<sup>20</sup>

Obviously these are not just replications of indigenous Muslim and Hindu cult myths. It would be an over-simplification to represent every form of south Indian Hindu, Muslim and Christian worship as part of a single undifferentiated pattern of worship, or to suggest that these traditions were all derived from the same sources. As in the case of the Tamilnad Muslims, these Christian traditions should be seen as an intermingling of indigenous cult worship with the motifs and doctrines imparted by western priests and missionaries. Like St Thomas, Xavier embodies explicitly Christian notions of sainthood which include the personification of the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection. The anecdotes about raising the dead and healing the sick refer to miracles performed by Jesus, and they also echo motifs from the legends of other well-known Christian saints. At the same time, the images of fecundity associated with the saint – the teeming fish, the sprouting blossoms and the miraculously delivered infants of the cult legends – are close to many Hindu and Muslim devotional motifs.

St Francis's tutelary functions are also related to those of the region's Muslim cult saints and deified Hindu preceptor-heroes. He too has come to provide a focus for the group's sense of shared corporate identity: the Paravas came to cohere around the figure of Xavier in the way that some Kallar and Marava clans formed around cult saints such as Kat Bava and

<sup>20</sup> Leon Besse, *La Mission du Maduré. Historique de ses Pangous* (Trichinopoly, 1914), p. 465. Baldaeus, *A True and Exact Description*, in Churchill, eds., *Collection of Voyages*, III, pp. 561–901.

Yusuf Khan. The difference here is the role which the Jesuits played in this process. It was they who encouraged the Paravas to revere St Francis as a supernaturally endowed tutelary figure, but this means that instead of detaching the group from the religion and culture of Tamilnad, the Padroado's acts of sponsorship and patronage had the effect of enhancing the Paravas' sense of caste identity. This helped to confirm many of the religious and cultural traditions which the Paravas held in common with Tamil Hindus and Muslims.

In addition, as in the case of the region's semi-legendary Sufis and Christian cult saints – figures as varied as Nather Wali, St Thomas and Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh – Xavier is revered as the bringer of the group's new faith: the sacred formulae which he imparts can be seen as a kind of *dhikr* or medium of initiation for his converts. His cult status is thus a product of his role as spiritual exemplar to the Paravas and as the creator of their new caste lifestyle. Therefore, as for the Keralan Christians who claim descent from St Thomas's earliest converts, Xavier serves as a reference point for many élite Parava lineages, particularly for the families of hereditary caste notables based in the port town of Manapad. This locality became one of the richest Parava trading centres during the colonial period, and its people take great pride in the fact that their town contains the saint's chief shrine, a cave venerated as Xavier's secret hermitage during his stay in the area.

The Manapad lineages who hold hereditary rank as *adappans* and *sittattis* all claim an ancestral connection with St Francis. The bases for these assertions vary: one leading Manapad family has long claimed to be descended from the missionary's Goan catechist, though in the nineteenth-century their detractors insisted that this much-cherished ancestor was really only the saint's body servant.<sup>21</sup> It is clear, then, that although Xavier was a formally canonised Christian saint, and a European at that, his cult tradition developed in much the same way as the region's *pir* and *pattavan* cults.

### Christianity as a caste lifestyle

In addition to the rise of this tutelary saint-cult tradition, the Paravas' new Christian religious culture was shaped so as to highlight

<sup>21</sup> Interviews in Manapad and at the Manapad cave shrine, 1977. Xavier died in China: his body was transferred to Portuguese Malacca in 1553 and was then moved to Goa. It was interred in the church of Bom Jesus and is still an object of great veneration. (Schurhammer, *Xavier*, IV, pp. 644–8.) The Manapad cave probably originated as a site associated with a local *pattavan* deity: see J.M. Villavarayan, *The Diocese of Kottar. A Review of its Growth* (Nagercoil, 1956), pp. 16–17.

the authority of the group's caste notables. Xavier used the pattangattis and other village-level notables as a kind of moral policing agency. He empowered them to levy fines for drunkenness, adultery and other transgressions, and their powers were then confirmed by the Portuguese civil authorities. These caste notables were also supposed to stamp out the worship of 'pagan' tutelaries and spirit divinities among the Paravas. The region's cult sites included the sacred rock shrine at Kovalam, which housed the spirit of a mythical king named Mannan Devan Parei. At sites like this Paravas shared with Shanars and other non-Christians in the worship of *pey* spirits, ammans (blood-taking goddesses) and other 'demonic' deities. In 1544 Xavier was enraged to find that 'heathen' images were still being produced in Parava villages, and he threatened to have the pattangattis of Punnayakayal placed in chains and carried off to Cochin for failing to carry out their new obligations.<sup>22</sup>

However high-handed they may have been, these demands helped to give the group its remarkable strength and cohesion as a jati or caste group. The tradition of worship which was being built up among the Paravas created a powerful fusion between the group's caste institutions and their identity as Roman Catholics. In effect Christianity became a caste lifestyle for the group, and the pattangattis and other notables became its guardians. The concept of a caste lifestyle has usually been associated with Hindus for whom shared dress styles, eating habits, marriage customs and traditions of worship have long helped to mark off one jati from another. Yet this is just what evolved amongst the Paravas. They too acquired their own tradition of corporate morality and shared religious observance. The fact that this combined Christian teachings with the group's existing code of behaviour merely gave the Paravas an unusually precise and distinctive caste dharma, and this was something which they sought to protect and perpetuate in the manner which has come to be associated with 'traditional' Indian caste groups.

Both before and after their conversion – indeed right up to the present day – the Paravas have maintained their own specialist service communities. These include hereditary caste barbers and washermen who perform all the tasks associated with such groups in the 'traditional' south Indian caste order. Together with their womenfolk, the Paravas' caste barbers and washermen carry out key ritual tasks at weddings, births,

<sup>22</sup> The Mannan Devan Parei shrine, located near Kanniyakumari, was still a popular centre of Shanar worship in the 1950s when the Jesuit historian Fr. Schurhammer found Christian Paravas making sacrifices at the shrine as their ancestors had done in Xavier's time. Schurhammer, *Xavier*, II, pp. 336–7.

funerals and other 'life-cycle' ceremonies. These service people deal with human impurities and wastes (hair and nail clippings, soiled garments, human after-birth substances, etc.) and this has meant that, like any other caste group, the Paravas have been able to maintain the corporate essence or substance of the jati in a world where most other jatis came to protect and delineate themselves in this way.<sup>23</sup>

Like the sea-going Tamil Muslims the Paravas also maintained a special class of client ritualists, the hereditary shark charmers or 'cuddulcutties' (*kadalkattis*, from Tam. *kadal*: sea and *kadi* defence, safeguard, drive off, overmaster). To all south Indians the sea was a domain of formless 'demonic' chaos, and to the seafarer, the man who sailed and dived in this demonic void, the hideous flesh-devouring shark was the living embodiment of these wild, destructive energies. As a result, it was necessary for every diver to patronise the shark charmer and to ensure that he performed the rites which were required to control and propitiate these beings. Neither the sea-going Muslims nor the Catholic Parava divers saw this as a belief which was incompatible with their Muslim or Christian religious identity. The shark charmers had been indispensable members of Labbai and Parava society before the groups' conversions; they continued to perform their customary tasks until well into the twentieth century, and each of the three colonial powers who established themselves on the 'fishery coast', the Portuguese, the Dutch and finally the British, accepted the fact that these ritual specialists had to be recognised and supported if the pearl and chank diving sessions were to succeed.<sup>24</sup>

For the Paravas, the support of service groups and client ritualists was part of a broader pattern of belief and behaviour which served to mark out their identity as a caste group. It was the task of the pattangattis and the other caste notables to preserve and order this corporate lifestyle. Again their pre-existing role as enforcers of the group's moral code had now been recognised and strengthened by the missionaries and the Portuguese colonial administration. This made it all the easier to harmonise the requirements of Christian belief and observance with the need to protect

<sup>23</sup> Interviews, Manapad, Tuticorin, Kanniyakumari Aug.-Sept. 1977; and printed Memorial from 'Bharathars of Tuticorin', 29 Sept. 1891, PCD (Parava Caste Documents Collection, Tuticorin). Compare Mosse's account of specialist service people amongst Ramnad Christians. 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', p. 266.

<sup>24</sup> BOR vol. 556/60/18 Nov. 1811/pp. 11398-409/TNA. The British made the shark charmer an official state pensioner so as to confirm the Madras Government's bond with the group's office-holders and to stop the kadalkatti from exacting high fees from the divers. TCR vol. 8008, letter dated Colombo, 3 Dec. 1857, Letters to Collector Misc. TNA; BOR vol. 3576, Maj. J.S. Fraser, Commissioner of Tuticorin fisheries to BOR, 7 Sept. 1820, pp. 135-8, TNA. And see Pawsey Papers, Box 1, SAS; *Marco Polo*, p. 293.

the caste's dharmic essence or 'blood'. In the eyes of the Padroado missionaries who succeeded St Francis Xavier, marriage was to become one of the identifying marks of orthodoxy and Christian conformity among the Paravas. The rites took place in church, they involved participation in one of the key sacramental acts of the Christian faith, and they followed the rules of 'consanguinity' by which the church regulated marriages between blood relations.<sup>25</sup>

The sacrament of baptism also played a key role in sustaining this sense of a distinctive corporate identity. Most Paravas still use the Christian baptismal names which became current among Padroado converts in the sixteenth century. Most of their forenames are roughly Tamilised European names, Suroi for Jerome, Susai for Joseph, Xaverimuthu for Xavier, Yagappan for James and so on. Their Portuguese surnames – Fernando, Roche, Victoria, Miranda, deRose, Costa, etc. – mark off exogamous descent groups within the jati: through their naming system the Paravas observe the standard Roman Catholic consanguinity regulations, but they also conform to indigenous Tamil conceptions of kin group exogamy.

Thus for the Paravas the concept of permissible and impermissible alliance was intelligible both in Christian terms, and also as part of the values and perceptions which they shared with the wider society. For Hindus (or persons whom we would now identify as Hindus) a union with someone of low or unclean or illegitimate birth is held to be improper because it damages the blood or corporate substance of the group. These two conceptions of marriage obviously differ at the level of formal doctrine. In practice, however, the Paravas found no difficulty in reconciling them. Only ordained priests could administer the sacraments. Since the first Parava was not ordained until 1894, all marriages and other key 'life-crisis' ceremonies were performed by the European church authorities: this gave the missionaries the power to enforce at least some of the church's standards in matters of marriage and procreation.<sup>26</sup> At the same time the Paravas were still able to maintain their own internal criteria in these areas of conduct. By the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries when detailed records are available, it had become one of the

<sup>25</sup> Schurhammer, *Xavier*, II, pp. 387–8. On shared 'blood' or 'substance' as the defining feature of the Indian caste system see Ronald Inden and McKim Marriott, 'Caste systems', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (London, 1974), pp. 983–4.

<sup>26</sup> During the nineteenth century several Brahman converts and Tamil *sat-sudra* Catholics were ordained as priests. On the turbulent career of the first ordained Parava, see J.E.A. Pereira, *Rev. Fr. L.X. Fernandes: An Appreciation* (Madras, 1936); and MS letter (Tamil) Francisco Ignaci Leo, adappan of Manapad to JT (jati talaivan) 2 May 1894, PCD.

main functions of the caste notables to prevent marriages which threatened the collective blood purity and honour of the caste. Here too the pattangattis and other title-holders had the power to mete out sanctions in cases of improper liaisons. It was they who controlled access to the caste banners and regalia which were carried in all Parava marriage and funeral processions: by withholding these items they could mark out transgressors as being outside the moral community. This gave the caste notables almost as much power over church rites as the priesthood, even though they could not administer the sacraments. The pattangattis and other title-holders could make an individual and his whole kin group effectively unmarriageable and could thus debar him from every important social and ceremonial contact within the community.

The importance of the indigenous dimension of Parava marriage and social relations was revealed more fully in the early nineteenth century when the colonial administration in Ceylon attempted to draw up a 'Malabar Code'. By this time, migrant Parava pearl divers and trading people were becoming increasingly numerous on the island, most notably along the northeast coast where the Ceylon pearl fisheries were held. The attempt to codify the practices and traditions governing marriage, inheritance and the control of property amongst different communities and caste groups in the subcontinent had become an important tool of British colonial statecraft. The aim, both in India and in other parts of the newly settled Asian empire, was to find a meeting ground between 'traditional' social practice and the need to rule from a basis of standardised legal formulae.<sup>27</sup> This particular code, which was drawn up in 1815, was to represent a compendium of customary law amongst the various Tamil-speaking groups who resided in northern Ceylon (either as permanent residents or as periodic migrants like the Paravas). In order to formulate it, the local authorities questioned those caste headmen who had been officially recognised as having judicial authority by both the Dutch and the British administration. Two Parava caste elders were consulted, the 'Jody Talaven' [sic] Dom Gaspar Antony da Cruz Vas Correia (r. 1808–1839) and Simon da Rosario of 'Calpetty'.<sup>28</sup>

In his statement to the investigators Dom Gaspar reported on many Parava marriage customs which corresponded exactly to those current in the wider Tamil Hindu population. For instance, 'gifts by the sisters of the bridegroom of sandal, rosewater, areca nuts, betel fruits, tender

<sup>27</sup> D.A. Washbrook, 'Law, state and agrarian society in colonial India', *MAS* 15:3 (1981), pp. 649–721.

<sup>28</sup> 'Calpetty' was probably a rendering of Kayalpatanam; colonial officials often confused this town with nearby Manapad.

coconuts and garlands' were presented to the bridegroom at the time of the binding of the bride's tali.<sup>29</sup> The most striking item in Dom Gaspar's report is his statement that,

in pursuance of the customs of us the bride . . . ought to be married to her father's sister's sons but it is prevented by our religion and consequently the bridegroom ought to grant tithe [*sic*] of the dowry obtained by him on such marriage as a gift commonly called waasatpady sucandram to the sister's sons of the bride's father and such donor [*sic*] should in return of that grant a suit of clothes to the bridegroom and in case of not having granted the above clothes the bridegroom shall deduct a certain sum commonly called anjoo pon and pay the remaining part of the money to them.<sup>30</sup>

What this meant was that the Paravas preserved a kind of ghostly fictive marriage system running parallel to the conventional pattern of Christian marriage alliance which they had adopted in recognition of European missionary teachings on consanguinity and permissible liaisons. This fictive system followed the pattern of the traditional Tamil murai alliance in which a man's ideal spouse was his father's sister's daughter. As Dom Gaspar testified, even though such marriages were banned under Roman Catholic consanguinity regulations, the Paravas still made prestations to their hypothetical murai marriage partners. Thus in everyday life they accepted the pre-eminence of the Christian marriage code; their actual practices were in conformity with the church's teachings on proper and permissible alliance. At the same time they were still conscious of the way in which 'proper' marriage alliances were defined in Tamil Hindu society, and, even 300 years after their conversion to Christianity, they continued to acknowledge these principles in the course of their own marriage ceremonies.

### **The rise of the Parava trading élite**

Because of their role as a major colonial client group, the Paravas' history is exceptionally well documented. Successive colonial administrations presented each jati talaivan with a sanad or official proclamation confirming his accession to the headmanship. Not only have most of these

<sup>29</sup> The statement describes other Parava marriage customs which correspond to those of local Hindu groups, e.g. a practice known as 'nalam neer chadancoo' – the presentation of gifts from the bridegroom to the bride's brother.

<sup>30</sup> PRO CO 54/123, pp. 210–18. 'Laws and customs of the Parawas and Chittys', letter from Antony da Cruz to P. W. van der Straaten, Acting Registrar to the Supreme Ct of Colombo, Tamil with English translation, 17 Oct. 1815, PRO. See also Simon Rosario to Straaten, 1 July 1815, 'Usage and Custom Existing among the Fishers, Parawas and [?] of Calpetty', *ibid.*, p. 162.

official endorsements survived, but for the period from about 1730 to 1955 there is a remarkable body of documents which illuminates almost every aspect of the group's economic and social life, as well as the growth and development of its caste institutions. This invaluable collection is made up of some 500 Tamil, Portuguese, French, Dutch and English manuscripts which are still in the possession of the last headman's family in Tuticorin. About half of these are the local office-holders' records of the group's pearling and trading operations; these throw much light on the economy of the Tamil coastline over a 250-year period. In addition there are about 200 written communications between the jati talaivans and the group's lesser village notables. There are appeals for the headman's arbitration in a wide range of commercial and ritual disputes; the documents also show how the caste élite sought to maintain the group's moral unity at a time of rapid economic and political change.

When the Paravas moved into new trades and occupations during the colonial period, the caste notables' sphere of operations widened enormously. The pattangattis and other title-holders imposed stringent standards of conduct and fair practice on the group's fishermen and traders. These developments served to reinforce the group's system of authority and office. Here too, in matters of permitted trading and fishing practice, violations were treated as moral crimes. Thus if a man used prohibited fishing nets or engaged in unfair competition against fellow traders he was punished by the pattangattis, adappans or moupans by being made to circle the village church on his knees or wear a crown of thorns during mass. As a last resort a transgressor could be denied the exchanges of ceremonial betel-nut and the other ritual tokens which gave validity to Parava 'life-crisis' rites including marriages, baptisms and funerals. This constituted formal 'out-casting'.<sup>31</sup>

The church and its rites came to underpin the group's system of caste leadership almost as soon as the Paravas became Christians. But while the pattangattis and other local-level notables became key figures in the creation of this Christian caste lifestyle, it was at the upper levels of the caste's organisation that this system really came into its own. After his baptism in 1532, the Vikirama Pandya had been adorned with quasi-ecclesiastical robes of office and endowed with an imposing string of aristocratic titles. As Senhor dos Senhores Dom Joao da Cruz, this first Christian caste headman or jati talaivan held his post from 1543 to 1553 and was recognised by the Padroado as the Paravas' supreme caste notable and pre-eminent intermediary with the Portuguese colonial

<sup>31</sup> Reports to jati talaivan [hereafter JT] from Vaippar 6 Oct. 1891; Sippikulam 23 Sept. 1891, Parava Caste Documents Collection (PCD).

authorities. Succession to the headmanship was placed on an hereditary basis after Dom Joao's death. There has been a total of twenty-one Parava caste headmen, all known as *jati talaivans*, and all descended from the family of the original Dom Joao da Cruz.<sup>32</sup>

Like the Tamil country's Shanar toddy tappers and Muslim leather workers and fishermen, the Paravas were a group whose traditional occupations led naturally into small-scale trade. Although fish was a product which no established Hindu commercial group would handle, demand was growing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as fresh and preserved fish became staple food items for many non-vegetarian groups. As a result, both the Labbais and the Paravas learned to operate their own marketing networks in the localities surrounding their home villages. Physical mobility was a crucial asset here. Through their periodic migrations to the Ceylon pearl and chank fisheries, the two maritime populations were able to make contact with a wider world of commercial exchange and maritime employment. The *maraikkar* Muslims were already well established in the great southeast Asian entrepôts before the arrival of the Portuguese. By the 1540s some Paravas were moving into small-scale seaborne trade as well, most notably in Ceylon and the Maldives.<sup>33</sup>

With the expansion of the Estado da India's coastal trading and tribute-taking operations, the majority of Paravas served their European patrons as pearl and chank divers; they also shipped as sailors on Portuguese warships and trading vessels and moved into the colonial ports' maritime support industries as boat-builders and sail-makers.<sup>34</sup> Although there was a general broadening and diversification of opportunity in this period, most of the new wealth which the Paravas derived from these activities was concentrated in the hands of the caste notables. It was the hereditary caste headman, the *jati talaivan*, and his immediate circle of high-ranking office-holders who had the cash in hand to invest in petty trading ventures. The *pattangattis* and other caste notables were

<sup>32</sup> The title '*Senhor dos Senhores*' meaning 'chief among the notables' was usually abbreviated as *Senhor Senhor*. A complete list of Parava *jati talaivans* with their dates of office is given in Motha, *Jathithalaimai*. The jewelled cross and gold chain of office which the Portuguese conferred on the first *jati talaivan* formed part of the headman's regalia up to the installation of the last headman in 1926. The Portuguese also used the title *Patangatyn-mor* or *pattangatti-mor*, chief among the *pattangattis*, for the *jati talaivan*. The term *pattangatti* was used by the Portuguese to refer to all Parava notables, although the Paravas themselves used it only in southern centres such as Kutankuli and Uvari.

<sup>33</sup> Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier*, II, p. 53. And see Ludden, *Peasant History*, pp. 46-59.

<sup>34</sup> On similar developments amongst the Sri Lankan Karava, see Roberts, *Caste Conflict*, pp. 50-3, 80-9.

empowered to collect kanikkai contributions from lower-ranking Paravas, and they and the caste headman also received fees from the colonial authorities for recruiting divers and sailors and despatching them to the pearl fishery sessions.<sup>35</sup>

In the middle of the seventeenth century, when Dutch naval forces expelled the Portuguese from their bases on the Coromandel coast, Parava localities such as Tuticorin, Manapad, Virapandiyanpatanam and Periyatalei entered a period of rapid growth as centres of the Netherlands' thriving textile trade.<sup>36</sup> The rise in cargo traffic in these ports led to a new demand for dock hands and skilled pilots and lightermen. The Paravas were particularly well qualified to fill these needs, and many more of them were able to use their increased cash incomes to move from diving and labouring to maritime trade. Some Paravas worked as *tindals* (masters of coastal boats) and the most enterprising began to trade in their own right, investing in small cargoes of textiles in the port-to-port textile trade which was now opening up between southern Tamilnad and Ceylon.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time the jati talaivan and his subordinate notables continued to provide the expertise required to run the pearling industry, and the Dutch (and after them the British) continued to endorse their powers and prestige as the Portuguese had done. As the Collector of Poligar 'Peshkash' reported in 1795, the jati talaivan 'is the person who was always employed by the Dutch, . . . [and is] the only one who is acquainted with the situation of the [pearl and chank] banks.'<sup>38</sup> With their guaranteed share of the pearl and chank revenues, the caste headman's family had an even greater edge over the mass of Parava fishermen and labourers than the village-based adappans and pattangattis. Furthermore, as these commercial connections with Ceylon became the most profitable activity open to the Paravas, participation in overseas trade became the main reference point in the group's internal status system. It was the caste notables who predominated in the group's trading activities, and so the distinction between families engaged in seaborne

<sup>35</sup> X.P. Fernando, Uvari pattangatti, to JT/11 Sept. 1891/PCD; T.A. Fernando to JT [date oblit.: 1891?] PCD; TCR vol. 7968/110/30 Aug. 1839/TNA. See also Motha, *Jathithalaimai*; Hornell, *The Sacred Chank*, pp. 8–12.

<sup>36</sup> Tuticorin (estimated population 3,000 in 1664) became the principal Dutch entrepôt on the southeast coast. Nieuhoff, *Voyages and Travels*, II, p. 293; Pate, *Tinnevely*, pp. 442–4; Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Jan Company in Coromandel 1605–1690. A Study in the Interrelations of European Commerce and Traditional Economies* ('S-Gravenhage, 1962).

<sup>37</sup> TCR vol. 7968/110/30 Aug. 1839/TNA; Nieuhoff, *Voyages and Travels*, p. 295.

<sup>38</sup> BOR vol. 143/7 Jan. 1796/11/pp. 82–7/TNA. As of 1795, when Tuticorin was surrendered to the English, the jati talaivan operated the Tirunelveli fisheries on behalf of the Dutch, who engaged to pay half of their annual proceeds to the nawab. Hornell, *The Sacred Chank*, pp. 8–10.

trade and the mass of fishermen, labourers and pedlars emerged as the most important division within the community. As in the case of the Tamil Muslim population with its distinctions between élite maraikkayar and low-ranking Labbais, ritual and social pre-eminence among the Paravas came to be defined in terms of commercial activity. A new title, *mējaikārar*, became the most common designation for the dominant Tuticorin lineages connected with the jati talaivan's family. This status category soon became an endogamous subdivision within the jati. Only recognised mejaikarar could marry members of the headman's lineage, and the mass of dependent, ritually inferior Paravas was viewed as a separate subdivision of the jati: this group became known as *kamārakkārar*.<sup>39</sup>

The term mejaikarar (from Tam. *mējai*: table) is often said to be a designation for those Paravas who are entitled to dine at the caste headman's table and are thus of the same ritual standing as the jati talaivan. According to one of the Paravas' nineteenth-century Jesuit missionaries, 'Les nobles [mejaikarar] seuls ont le droit d'asseoir à la table ou le chef [jati talaivan] prend son festin.'<sup>40</sup> On the other hand a document of 1813 in which the jati talaivan himself described the group's internal status system and customs of 'respect' suggests that the right to sit down at the European-style table used during Parava wedding feasts was the specific determinant of mejaikarar status. Although the table was a distinctly un-Tamil importation, this was comparable to the way in which many Hindu communities have come to mark out local gradations of caste rank and primacy. Rights and 'honours' held at marriage ceremonies and other corporate rituals involving the exchange of foodstuffs are still used to affirm or reconstitute local-level status hierarchies.<sup>41</sup>

The document also states that low-ranking kamarakkakar were allowed to eat in company but not to sit; and that other Paravas including 'slaves', 'emancipated slaves' and persons guilty of moral offenses – adulteresses, illegitimate children and 'all those who are performing mean services unfit for their ranks' – were altogether excluded from communal eating on marriage occasions. This too supports the view that the Paravas perceived themselves as a moral community and believed that their corporate honour, that is their collective blood or substance', could be

<sup>39</sup> See Chitty, 'History of the Parawas', pp. 133–4; Pate, *Tinnevely*, p. 123.

<sup>40</sup> 'Only the nobles [mejaikarar] have the right to sit at the table where the [caste] headman has his feast.' Verdier, 'Mémoire', MMA. The terms 'mejaikarar' and 'kamarakkakar' were used primarily in Tuticorin, but all Parava settlements observed the same distinction between ritually inferior fishermen and labourers and high-ranking trading families (from whom adappans, sittattis and other caste notables were drawn.)

<sup>41</sup> Cited in TCR vol. 7968/110/30 Aug. 1839/TNA.

damaged or degraded by acts of sexual impropriety or by other offences which contravened their shared dharmic code.<sup>42</sup> What can also be seen here is that the new wealth which the Paravas derived from their overseas trading ventures had the effect of creating a much more stratified form of caste organisation within the group. This new emphasis on status and hierarchy was carried over into the Paravas' religious life. With the co-operation of the Padroado missionaries, the Paravas' church rites and corporate saint-cult festivals came to function as spectacular tableaux which confirmed the primacy of the jati talaivan and the other élite mejaikarar title-holders.

### The cult of the Paravas' Virgin patroness

It was the Jesuits who set the scene for this assertion of opulent 'little kingship' amongst the Paravas. In 1555 the Padroado authorities brought a statue of the Virgin from Manila and installed it in the chapel which they had built for their Parava converts in Punnayakayal. This figure was an image of the Virgin in her personification as Our Lady of Snows. The name derives from the legend of the fifth-century Roman basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, which is said to have been built on the site of a miraculous midsummer fall of snow. Despite its western European origins, the cult of Our Lady of Snows was rapidly recast along the lines of an indigenous Tamil cult tradition. This transformation began in 1582 when the original wooden image was moved to the port town of Tuticorin – newly designated as Portugal's headquarters on the 'fishery coast' – and installed in an imposing new church which became known as the *Periyakovil* (literally 'great church') or *Matakovil* ('mother church').<sup>43</sup>

As in the case of the Padroado's St Thomas shrines in Mylapore, the popularity of the new Virgin cult had much to do with the impressive setting which had been created for the cult image, and with the skilled proselytising carried out by the shrine's Jesuit managers. There was yet another parallel with the cult of St Thomas. Our Lady of Snows soon became the community's chief patroness and protector: she was and still is the Paravas' main tutelary figure, holding immense power for all

<sup>42</sup> The term 'mean services' appears to refer to the impropriety of dishonouring one's subcaste status: if a man of a trading lineage became a labourer or fisherman he was guilty of defiling the élite standing of the mejaikarar. The Parava caste documents bear this out: many of the letters discuss sanctions to be taken by the caste notables in cases of adultery and other misbehaviour.

<sup>43</sup> J.M. Ladislaus Gomez, *Pictorial Souvenir of the Golden Car of Our Lady of Snows Tuticorin* (Tuticorin, 1969), pp. 7–11.

members of the jati. By the early seventeenth century, the Parava jati talaivan had been established as supreme patron and sponsor of the new cult. As Vikirama Adita Pandyan, the group's caste headman had already begun to play the role of a reigning sovereign amongst his fellow Paravas. Now the creation of the Tuticorin Virgin cult allowed for much greater emphasis on the headman's kingly attributes. From the caste documents it is clear that by the 1620s the group had built up a complex internal status system which focused on the rites and festivals of this great Tuticorin shrine. This scheme of graded rights and honours (*Tam. mariyātai*) allowed the jati talaivan to exercise powers which were directly analogous to those of a Hindu 'little king' performing his tasks as chief donor or *yajamāna* in the shrines and temples of his domain. Under this system the Paravas' Padroado missionaries devised an elaborate set of status markers for the jati talaivan and his subordinate caste notables.<sup>44</sup> These tokens of pre-eminence closely resembled the rights and honours which expressed relationships of rank and precedence in south Indian Hindu 'honours' systems. Similar rights featured in the region's temple 'honours' disputes, and today south Indian worshippers still bid large sums for such privileges.<sup>45</sup>

The obvious difference here was that the Parava headman's 'honours' were all related to Christian rites of worship, and the most jealously guarded of these ceremonial privileges were the ones which focused on the headman's ties to the Tuticorin Virgin and her cult. Thus, according to elaborate lists and schedules which were stored in the Periyakovil, the caste headman alone held the right to sit in a special seat directly below the Virgin's statue during mass, and, as the group's shrines and rituals became increasingly opulent over the next few generations, it was he who possessed the sole right to have the image unveiled and bedecked with her growing collection of jewels during marriages within his family. Caste notables in the villages were granted corresponding rights of primacy within their own parish churches. They too were guaranteed special seats near the Sanctuary, and here too, they alone crowned the sacred images in local festivals and decked them in their robes and ornaments.<sup>46</sup>

By the middle of the seventeenth century, this shift towards increasingly lavish acts of piety meant that the jati talaivan and the other élite trading families were expected to enrich the churches with increasingly

<sup>44</sup> 1947 *Our Lady of Snows Festival Souvenir Volume* (Tuticorin, 1947).

<sup>45</sup> Appadurai and Breckenridge, 'The south Indian temple', p. 197; Mackenzie, 'Caste Insignia'; Reiniche, *Les dieux et les hommes*, p. 96; André Beteille, 'Social organisation of temples in a Tanjore village', *History of Religions* 5:1 (1965), pp. 90-1; Beck, *Peasant Society in Konku*, p. 79.

<sup>46</sup> 1947 *Our Lady of Snows Festival Souvenir Volume*.

opulent endowments. The church of Our Lady of Snows became a treasure trove of gold leaf and jewels, with rich hangings on the walls and silver vessels for the mass.<sup>47</sup> Towards the end of the seventeenth century a new focus emerged for the group's newly sharpened status system. The Paravas had already begun to stage periodic processional rites in honour of their Virgin patroness. Now, as the jati talaivan and the other great trading lineages began to pour their wealth into these ceremonial events, the festivals of Our Lady of Snows took on a new importance for the group and soon came to function as a great corporate celebration of power and kingship.

In its modern form the Tuticorin Virgin festival dates from 1720 when the jati talaivan and a number of other élite Parava traders and caste notables arranged for the construction of a great ceremonial chariot known as the *pon tēr* or Golden Car of Our Lady of Snows. Then, in their role as donors or yajamanas of the festival, these notables sponsored a lavish ten-day festival in which the image of the Tuticorin Virgin was enthroned on the great wheeled ter and dragged in triumph through the streets adjoining the Periyakovil. The original ter of 1720 was used for each successive Golden Car festival until 1806, when the jati talaivan and a number of other rich Parava boat-owners and traders had a new 75-foot ter built: this massive structure is still in use today.<sup>48</sup>

These lavish Golden Car Festivals were based in part on the great Catholic church processions of southern Europe. Even so many of their features were derived from south Indian Hindu models. Much of the trappings and organisation of this Parava festival were taken from the utsavams of the great Sri Subrahmanyasami temple at Tiruccentur, 24 miles from Tuticorin. This temple has long been cited as a reference point in the creation of the Paravas' ceremonial cult tradition. The Tuticorin festival also has much in common with the Hindu festival of Navarattiri: this was the rite that was adopted by the region's seventeenth and eighteenth centuries warrior rulers as a mark of their newly constituted claims of kingship.<sup>49</sup> All this was done with the explicit approval of the

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Fr. Bertrand, 10 Feb. 1840, in *Lettres des nouvelles missions du Maduré* (4 vols., Lyons, 1839–40), II, letter 35.

<sup>48</sup> Gomez, *Pictorial Souvenir*, p. 83. At present the drawing of the Tuticorin car takes place every thirteen years during the August feast of Our Lady of Snows. I attended the festival in 1977 when over 50,000 worshippers and spectators assembled to witness the dragging of the ter. The devotees spent hours chanting and singing and dragging the car along the town's streets; they were organised with impressive skill by teams of stewards. Large sums had been spent on imported gold leaf to adorn the cult statue, and one of the most prestigious of the 'honours' purchased by the year's chief donors was the right to pay the Tamilnadu Electricity Board to take down all the overhead power lines along the procession route so that the spire of the ter could pass unimpeded.

<sup>49</sup> See above, p. 66.

Padroado authorities, and it was this fusion of Hindu and Christian motifs and traditions which gave the Paravas such a strong and coherent caste identity.

As in all the great Hindu utsavams or ter-pulling festivals of Tamilnad, the Paravas' Pon Ter Vizha is to be understood as a royal progress. In Tamil Hindu temple rites, the ter is at once a war-chariot, a mobile palace and a representation of the god's temple. During these festivals the god or goddess is enthroned on his ter and vested with royal trappings; the great car is then drawn in triumph along its designated procession route. This route is the deity's symbolic kingdom. As he proceeds among his worshippers, he (or the priest-attendants who act on his behalf) receives the offerings which are presented by his subject-devotees; the god returns these prestations in the form of *prasatam* (consecrated flowers and foodstuffs). These ceremonial exchanges affirm the god's sovereign status, and they also express the bonds of social rank and primacy which are continually being built up and recorded among his devotees.<sup>50</sup>

The details of the Paravas' Pon Ter Vizha correspond closely to the rites and practices of these Hindu ter festivals. In the Tuticorin procession rites the figure of Our Lady of Snows is hailed as a sovereign and conqueror. Furthermore, until the 1940s, when the caste headman began to lose his customary primacy, the festivals created an explicit parallel between the sovereignty of the Paravas' divine patroness and the status and pre-eminence of the group's 'little king' the jati talaivan. It is this parallel which is dramatised most explicitly in the Hindu Navarattiri festival. In the Navarattiri the kingdom's tutelary god or goddess is honoured with a procession of royal courtiers and office-holders. In Tuticorin the tutelary figure is Our Lady of Snows, the sovereign is the jati talaivan and his court in its processional marching order consists of the caste notables and all the privileged Parava festival donors.

As in these Hindu rites, the Tuticorin festival always began with a ceremonial flag-hoisting led by the Parava caste headman. This corresponded to the flag-raising [Tam. *kotiërram*] enacted at the start of the Tamil Hindu utsavam: the hoisting of the temple flag was a 'kingly' right which was once held by south Indian chiefs and rajas, and this was also the role taken by the Kallar clan chiefs at the start of the annual kanturi or commemoration festival at the Kat Bava dargah. The Tuticorin Golden Car festival has also featured distributions of *prasatam* offerings, which in this case take the form of consecrated flower petals from the garlands adorning the Virgin and her chariot.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> See above, p. 42.

<sup>51</sup> *Prasatam* distributions could still be observed at the Golden Car festival in 1977.

A set of twenty-one distinctive painted banners corresponding to the 'traditional' procession flags used in the region's Hindu festivals are still kept in the jati talaivan's house. These flags are adorned with a striking mixture of Saivite and Vaishnavite sacred symbols. There is a five-headed cobra (Sesha, protector and vehicle or emblem of lord Vishnu) a boar (evoking the figure of Vishnu as Varaha), a bull (Nandi, the companion of Siva) a figure of Garuda (the sun-bird vehicle of Lord Vishnu) a peacock (symbol of Lord Murugan-Subrahmanya, and also of St Thomas) and the Saivite chank or conch shell (though this is also associated with the group's traditional sea-faring occupations, as are the devices of an oyster shell with pearls and a wooden sailing vessel). Most of the other devices are straightforward symbols of kingship: a lion, a tiger, an elephant, a parrot (presumably referring to the nayaka rulers' parrot symbol) and a lump of gold signifying power and opulence. There is also a shark device, evoking the malevolent sea demons whose powers had always to be warred down and dissipated at the start of every fishery.

These flags were formally handed over to the Parava caste barbers of Tuticorin at the start of each Pon Ter Vizha; it was one of their key service tasks to act as banner carriers during the festivals, and also to bear the ceremonial banners and other items which were carried during Parava marriage and funeral processions.<sup>52</sup> The jati talaivan was guardian of the Parava caste regalia, including the 'kingly' silk umbrella, bronze shields and sun-shades which were used in these processions. The Golden Car processions were required to stop for special prayers at a *pantal* (canopied enclosure) erected in front of the caste headman's house. These interludes corresponded to the *tirukkans* (ritual halts) staged during Hindu festival processions at the houses of prominent festival donors.<sup>53</sup>

One of the most notable features of these Parava ceremonies is the way in which the group's caste histories and oral traditions came to relate the Paravas and their rituals to the great Hindu temples of southern Tamilnad. In the southern-most Parava localities the famous virgin-goddess temple at Kanniyakumari is a widely cited point of reference among the region's village-level caste notables. These families assert that they are descended from Hindu warrior chiefs who acted as kingly donors

<sup>52</sup> The Parava marriage banners were replicas of these 'kingly' procession flags, and, like other south Indians, Parava bridegrooms dress as sovereigns in miniature, wearing replicas of the jati talaivan's ceremonial costume.

<sup>53</sup> The sunshade, umbrella and other items were all tokens of kingship in south India. On the significance of the *tirukkan* see Appadurai and Breckenridge, 'The south Indian temple', p. 194.

or yajamanas in the Kanniyakumari ter festivals.<sup>54</sup> In the more northerly Parava villages it is sometimes held that the great Tuticorin chariot is modelled on the ter of one of the great Tamil amman shrines: the temple of Minaksi Sundaresvarar at Madurai is usually cited in these accounts.<sup>55</sup>

Elsewhere, these Parava traditions focus on the Tiruccentur temple. It is widely held, for example, that the group possessed prestigious 'honours' at the Tiruccentur temple before they became Christians.<sup>56</sup> The most important of these was the 'honour' which symbolised the pre-eminence of many pre-colonial chiefs and rajas in the temples of their domains: this was the right to give the first ceremonial pull to the rope with which the ter is dragged at the start of every utsavam. The Paravas' great saint-cult festivals all begin with this same act: in Tuticorin it was another of the jati talaivan's 'honours' or rights of precedence to give the first pull to the great golden chariot carrying the image of Our Lady of Snows. In villages such as Kanniyakumari which also began to stage great ter festivals in the nineteenth-century, this right was held by the hereditary moupans.<sup>57</sup>

It is unlikely that any Parava notable ever really held such an honour at Tiruccentur. As practitioners of unclean occupations the Paravas would have had only a peripheral share in the rites of a major Hindu shrine. It was therefore as Christians that the group acquired a central role in their own Hindu-style festival rites, even though this gain in status was expressed in relation to an explicitly Hindu scheme of rank and honour. This does not mean that the Paravas are to be seen as Tamil Hindus in thin disguise. While they still observed the principles of the indigenous

<sup>54</sup> Today the only non-Christian lineage names in general use among the Paravas are Kālingarāyan, Villavarāyan, Poobalarāyan and Rāyan. These are probably derived from *arāyan*, a caste title used by Tamil Hindu fishing groups. In localities like Kanniyakumari it is said that these names were originally titles used by lineages who had the right to act as 'kingly' temple donors, and that the suffix arayan is derived from the word *rāyya[n]*, meaning raja, king.

<sup>55</sup> There is a version of the Paravas' caste origin myth which says that the sixteenth-century ruler Visvanatha Nayaka (1559–63) drove the Paravas from their original home in Madurai, where they once held prestigious honours in the goddess's temple utsavam processions.

<sup>56</sup> The Tiruccentur shrine may have acquired this significance for the Paravas through the nayakas' policy of endowing temples with shares in pearling revenues. These rulers may have rewarded Parava notables as well as Muslim leaders for their collaboration in the pearl fisheries. Even if the Paravas were excluded from this relationship, they may still have aspired to provide ritual services at Tiruccentur, transforming this into a claim of prestigious 'honours' in the temple's festivals. See above, note 8.

<sup>57</sup> *Our Lady of Snows Festival Volume*. The tradition of Parava honours at Tiruccentur is cited in an edition of the seventeenth-century Tamil epic *Shenbagarāmam Pallu* published by a Parava caste historian in 1947. See M.J. Kalingarayar, ed., *Shenbagarāmam Pallu*, 2nd edn. (Nagercoil, 1947), pp. 4, 30–1.

honours system, they had also acquired a new and distinctive set of rites, beliefs and cult traditions, and these became the constituent elements of the group's newly reconstituted caste lifestyle. Unlike the Malabar Syrians, however, the Paravas acquired a Christian caste lifestyle which depended on validation and endorsement from European church and colonial authorities, and not from the local Hindu ruling groups.

### **Opulence amongst the Parava 'little kings'**

By the end of the eighteenth century the Parava jati talaivan was firmly established as a little king or '*prince de la caste*' as the Jesuits called him. Shortly after the construction of the new Golden Car, the headman's family rebuilt their beach-front house in Tuticorin: it was known from this point on as 'Pandyapathy Palace'.<sup>58</sup> The same kingly vocabulary was used in all communications between the jati talaivan and other members of the caste. In their letters and reports to him the subordinate caste notables referred to themselves and all other lower-ranking Paravas as the caste headman's 'subjects'. He was 'Your highness', or the 'King of the Bharatha dynasty'; a favourite phrase was 'your glory hides the sun, your palanquin is drawn by lions'.<sup>59</sup> The installation ceremonies which were enacted for each new jati talaivan took the form of a lavish coronation ceremony presided over by the Padroado missionaries in the church of Our Lady of Snows. Even at the installation of the last officially recognised Parava caste headman in 1926, the new jati talaivan was said to 'ascend to the gadi' (the throne of an Indian sovereign) when he took up his titles. This phrase was used by the Paravas themselves, and in the sanads and other certifying documents issued by the colonial authorities.<sup>60</sup>

Once the caste headman was installed, the pattangattis and other local notables came to him periodically to make ceremonial offerings of kanikkai: the jati talaivan then affirmed his role as patron and dispenser of largesse by feasting the assembled notables. He also went on periodic tours of the Parava localities during which he again received royal honours and prestations. The headman's vehicle on these and other

<sup>58</sup> JT to Portuguese Ambassador (printed petition) 4 Feb. 1930, PCD.

<sup>59</sup> Letters to JT: Pollikarai, 30 Nov. 1890; from Alandalei 'labourers' 19 Jan. 1896; from Periyatalei 'villagers' (n.d. [1894?]) PCD; JT to Msgr. Zaleski [papal legate] (MS draft) Tuticorin 23 Oct. 1893, PCD.

<sup>60</sup> MS Dutch sanad of succession, 9 June 1799, issued to JT Dom Gabriel deCruze Vaz Gomes by I.W. Falck, 'Governor of Ceylon and its dependencies', PCD; English sanad 3 June 1808; also later sanads dated 1856, 1889 and 1926, PCD. The collection also contains two Dutch sanads of 1763.

ceremonial occasions was a richly adorned 'lion-faced' palanquin inlaid with ivory and sandalwood: the jati talaivans' descendants still have a fine collection of these conveyances. In south India the palanquin was a well-known princely emblem. During the pre-colonial period the right to be transported on a palanquin became a highly coveted 'kingly' honour – this was a right conferred on aspiring 'little kings' by their sovereign overlords, and the palanquin became a symbol of hierarchy and elevated rank for Christians as well as Hindu caste groups in the south. Thus equipped with his royal signs and emblems, the caste headman's journeys served as an affirmation of power and primacy; they corresponded to the tours of religious and strategic sites by which Muslim as well as Hindu rulers sought to constitute their domains.

This emphasis on rank and hierarchy also became increasingly marked in the lifestyle of Parava trading families in the localities outside Tuticorin. Here too the office-holding élite used their new wealth to foster opulent church rites and festivals. In 1583 the village of Manapad had been presented with a certified fragment of the True Cross. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the locality's annual feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross had become an arena in which the local adappans and other sea-going caste notables came to affirm and magnify their power. This trading élite dominated the prestigious Confraternity of the Five Wounds of Our Lord, a Jesuit-sponsored lay brotherhood modelled on the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century urban confraternities of southern Europe. It was this pious organisation which sponsored the Holy Cross festival. Like the Tuticorin Golden Car festivals, this event came to be organised as a display of rank and patronage by Manapad's caste notables. Since the nineteenth century one of their number has come to act as chief donor and sponsor of these annual festivals. When the members parade bearing their sceptres and wearing their distinctive crowns and robes the chief donor takes primacy in the procession. Then, like a princely jajman feasting the local Brahmans, this chief Parava notable feasts all the Roman Catholic priests who have gathered in Manapad for the festival.<sup>61</sup>

These same Parava office-holding families also adopted distinctive dress styles and purification rituals which served to mark them off from the mass of labouring and fishing families. Here too the Paravas were conforming to a standard of élite behaviour which they shared with many other south Indian caste groups. In some Parava localities the children of adappans began to be given a purificatory oil-bath as part of their

<sup>61</sup> Interviews with members of the Miranda family, Manapad, 1977; Holy Cross festival and confraternity procession observed Sept. 1977.

customary birth rituals. Women of the established trading élite also began to wear the dhupatta (Tam. *tuppaddā*) the loose silk or cotton head and breast covering which is worn as a token of purity and strict moral observance among many Hindu and Muslim groups in north and south India.<sup>62</sup>

During the nineteenth century some of the Parava trading families who had settled in inland localities such as Madurai and Palaiyamkottai even began to adopt a qualified form of vegetarianism. It will be remembered that many St Thomas Christians were doing much the same thing in this period. In the case of the Paravas, the serving of 'pure' rice and vegetable preparations was reserved for wedding feasts and other ceremonial events, but, even though this was only token vegetarianism, it too reflected the shift towards 'Sanskritic' standards of purity and corporate morality which was one of the outstanding features of south Indian society in the colonial period.<sup>63</sup>

Another sign of this new hierarchical caste lifestyle was a substantial change in the group's relationships with other nearby caste groups and communities. It has already been seen that for many centuries after their conversion to Christianity, the Paravas had joined local Shanars in the worship of local spirits and cult deities, and they had accepted the Shanars as a group of roughly equivalent caste rank and status. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, though, Parava trading families in localities such as Manapad and Periyatalei began use their new wealth to invest in land and palmyra-tree holdings, and large numbers of Shanar cultivators became their tenants. This enabled the Parava notables to add extra emphasis to their claims of rank and primacy. The Shanars had become their dependants and retainers: this meant that the Paravas were in a position to act as lordly patrons – as jajmans, commanding the labour of a ritually inferior client or *kamin* group.<sup>64</sup>

This was a claim which was hotly resisted by many Shanars, particularly as they too began to make significant economic gains in their own right. By the end of the nineteenth-century there was a long-standing tradition of Parava–Shanar conflict in these localities, and even today there are battles between the two groups in many of the region's adjoining Shanar and Parava villages. Initially, though, these new Parava landholding families gained the upper hand. In the 1850s and 60s, for

<sup>62</sup> Patricia Jeffery, *Frogs in a well. Indian women in purdah* (London, 1979), pp. 4–5; Anantha Krishna Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, II, pp. 44, 202–3.

<sup>63</sup> Interviews, Tuticorin, Manapad, Palaiyamkottai, 1977.

<sup>64</sup> These moves may be compared with the Syrians' campaigns of mass 'conversion' amongst low-caste Malayalis: these too were assertions of supremacy over groups who were defined as ritually inferior. (See above, pp. 314–15.)

example, no Shanar could enter the Parava village of Manapad without assuming the demeanour of a humble client or supplicant approaching his lord: sandals had to be removed, the torso was to be uncovered, and Tamil speech forms expressing deference and inferiority were to be used to all Paravas.

What is so striking about this is that the majority of these Shanar tenants were Roman Catholics, converted during successive waves of Jesuit missionary work from the seventeenth century onward (see chapters 10 and 11). The Paravas, though, rejected any notion of ceremonial parity with these co-religionists and insisted on treating all Hindu and Christian Shanars as their ritual inferiors. In Manapad they made a particular point of excluding Christian Shanars from the Holy Cross festival rites although Hindus and other Christians – Malayalis as well as Tamils – were welcomed to this great corporate celebration. In contrast many Manapad Paravas say that they remember the days when Muslims from the nearby maritime locality of Kulasekarapatanam took part in the Manapad Holy Cross festival, and that this sharing of festival rites was widespread throughout the nineteenth century. This might seem surprising given the ancient animosity which is supposed to have existed between the Paravas and the sea-going Muslims of Tamilnad, but certainly in the late nineteenth century, at a time when the caste notables were coming under increasing pressure (as this chapter will show) many Paravas were eager to claim kinship with these Muslims. Thus the jati talaivan himself made an attempt to preserve and expand his ‘little kingdom’ by asserting that the élite Muslims of Kayalpatanam and some of the other maraikkayar towns were people of his own blood and descendants of his own royal ‘Pandyan’ ancestors.

During a very ancient period when my Pandyan pagan forefathers were rulers in southern Indian, they were overcome by the Mahammadans . . . to escape from the ferocity of the bigoted Mahammadans many crossed to Ceylon and some embraced the Moslem faith and are still living in Cayalpatnam, Kulasekarapatanam, Kilakara [*sic*]&c in south India.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the apparently ‘communal’ phrasing, what was really being said here was that the region’s prestigious maritime groups shared the same blood and ‘substance’ and that the jati talaivan ought to be recognised as ‘little king’ of them all, Christian and Muslim. It was now in the Paravas’ interest to foster connections which marked them off from Christians of low rank who might otherwise be grouped with them as members of the same religious community. Furthermore under the

<sup>65</sup> MS draft, JT to Bp. Mylapore, 6 Dec. 1900, PCD.

nawabi regime the revenues of the chank fishery were usually rented out to maraikkayar magnates from Kilakkarai. With the encouragement of the British revenue authorities these renters worked in close concert with the Parava caste élite, and this helped to create an increasingly close bond between the Parava caste notables and the élite maraikkayar families from these Muslim coastal centres.<sup>66</sup>

### **Paravas and poligars**

Despite their Christian religious culture and their close links to the European traders and fishery authorities, the Paravas never really conformed to the stereotype of the typical colonial client group. Certainly by the eighteenth century the group's relationship with their European patrons was becoming increasingly complex and contradictory: far from being dependent on the colonial powers, the Paravas took the initiative in matters of religion and commerce, and even began to move far outside their colonial patrons' political networks. These trends were confirmed towards the end of the eighteenth century. In 1773 Pope Clement XIV disbanded the Society of Jesus. Many of its missionaries were expelled from India; the rest soldiered on and eventually died at their posts. In the Tamil country a few Goan priests and one or two Syrian Christian katanars managed to establish themselves in Parava localities, but these clerics were never offered the same deference which had been accorded to the Jesuits.<sup>67</sup> As a result the jati talaivan and his subordinate caste notables gained effective control over the group's ritual and social life: it was now their acts of endorsement which gave validity to Parava marriages and other domestic life-cycle rites.

With the expansion of British power along the Coromandel coast, the Dutch East India Company began to lose its leading role in the region's maritime export trades. Furthermore Ramnad and the other southern chieftoms, and later the nawab's regime, all began to make competing claims on the region's pearl and chank fishery revenues. As a result the specialist sea-going communities became even more valuable as collaborator-client groups within these cross-cutting political networks. Against this background of heightened economic and political competition, the Dutch and the British began trying to outmanoeuvre one another by asserting exclusive rights of authority and patronage over the Paravas. The British seized control of Tuticorin in 1785 and held the

<sup>66</sup> Collector to BOR 27 Dec. 1795, no. 11: 7 Jan. 1796, BOR vol. 143, pp. 82–7, TNA.

<sup>67</sup> See Neill, *History of Christianity*, II pp. 127–32; Western, *Early History of the Tinnevely Church*, pp. 33–4.

town again between 1795 and 1818. By the beginning of the nineteenth century they had managed to replace the Dutch as chief validating authority for the Parava jati talaivans. Until 1779 it was the Dutch who issued the sanads (or certificates) which ratified the succession of each new Parava caste headman, but in 1808, at the time of the next headman's 'accession to the gadi', the Paravas turned to the British to perform this task for them.<sup>68</sup> Even so, the Dutch did not relinquish their claims to the 'fishery coast' headquarters until 1825, and they tried repeatedly to force the Parava divers and boat-owners to operate on their behalf rather than that of the British. Throughout this period the Parava caste notables played off one European power against the other, withdrawing boats from the pearl and chank fisheries and offering their diving services to the British authorities in return for a guarantee of protection from the Dutch and, more importantly, an increase in their allocation of pearl and chank shares.<sup>69</sup>

Like the Portuguese, both the Dutch and the British associated maritime Muslims with local Indian rulers, while assuming that the Paravas were automatically dependent on one of the European powers. What they discovered, though, was that the Parava jati talaivans were capable of entering this scramble for resources in their own right. In 1797 when the famous 'Vaduga' (or Tottiyan) chief Kattaboma Nayaka of Panjalamkuricci launched the last of the south's great poligar 'rebellions', this ruler's search for new resources led him straight to the jati talaivan and the maritime trading and diving operations to which the Parava caste leaders had such ready access. The British authorities were outraged when Kattaboma Nayaka recruited the jati talaivan Dom Gabriel Gomes deCruze Vaz (1779–1808) into his newly expanded political network. This became an event of key importance to the Paravas. The 'kingship' of the jati talaivan was seen as having been much enhanced by his incorporation into the political network of the hero chief Kattaboma Nayaka. There are still members of the caste headman's family who tell tales of a secret treasure which Kattaboma Nayaka is supposed to have buried in a site next to the jati talaivan's Pandiyapathy Palace. The theme of hidden gold as a token of political legitimacy is a common one in south India, as in the legendary legitimization of Yusuf Khan through his seizure of the Madurai nayakas' treasure.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Sanad of succession 9 June 1779 and sanad of 3 June 1808, PCD. In theory, the British were merely agents of the Walahjah nawabs.

<sup>69</sup> Collector to BOR 14 Feb. 1799, no. 21, BOR vol. 219, pp. 1254–57 TNA; Tuticorin pearl fishery Commissioner to Collector 2 Sept. 1820, and Commissioner to BOR 7 Sept. 1820, BOR vol. 3576, pp. 129–32, 135–8, TNA.

<sup>70</sup> Interviews with the Motha family, Tuticorin, July 1977.

This turned out to be a short-lived alliance. Months before the defeat and execution of the Panjalamkuricci poligar it was found that the jati talaivan 'had dared to conceal and protect several Rebels against the Company's Government', and, in response to this 'very licentious and outrageous conduct on the part of Sady Talaiven [*sic*]' Stephen Lushington, the new Collector of 'Poligar Peshkash' in Ramnad and Tirunelveli, had the Company's forces 'seize the Person and Papers of Jady Talaven [*sic*] his son and those of his Relations who are stated to have participated in his guilt'. At Lushington's insistence Dom Gabriel was then to be 'suspended from the future exercise of all authority, as Head of the Cast [*sic*]',<sup>71</sup>

Much to the Collector's consternation, this move was opposed by the British authorities in Colombo. They claimed that there could be no Manaar pearl fishery without the services of the jati talaivan; Lushington was overruled and Dom Gabriel was reinstated.<sup>72</sup> This reversal shows that the Paravas and their caste notables possessed more power and manoeuvring ability than one might expect of a low-caste convert client community. The story also reveals that the Paravas were beginning to engage in hotly contested local honours disputes. Here too, as in the hinterland communities which will be described in chapters 10 and 11, the emergence of a newly prosperous trading group was beginning to unsettle the region's delicately balanced relationships of rank and precedence. In this case what was involved were internal conflicts rather than confrontations between separate caste groups. With the rapid growth that was taking place in the region's maritime economy, many more Paravas were beginning to make the jump from labouring to trade, or more commonly from small-scale land-based peddling to the more prestigious world of seaborne commerce. These families began to seek entry into the élite mejaikarar status category, and this attempt to reorder the group's established ranking system produced much unrest.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century then, many Paravas found themselves at odds with the jati talaivan as he attempted to arbitrate in assignments of rank and precedence. In 1799, when Dom Gabriel 'declared for the rebel poligar', a group of nineteen disaffected Tuticorin Paravas launched a campaign to unseat the jati talaivan, or at least to force him to revoke these contested decisions in cases of disputed mejaikarar

<sup>71</sup> Lushington to BOR, no. 21, 14 Feb. 1799, BOR vol. 219, pp. 1254-7; Lushington to Maj. Macaulay, commanding, Palaiyamkottai, 6 July 1801, BOR vol. 3579, p. 29, TNA.

<sup>72</sup> The Madras government accepted that the presence of the jati talaivan was 'of essential consequence to the success of the fishery'. Lushington, Collector of Poligar Peshkash, to BOR, no. 21, 4 Feb. 1799, BOR vol. 219, pp. 1254-7, TNA.

caste status. In order to improve their bargaining power they attempted to widen the caste headman's breach with the British authorities by persuading the Collector that Dom Gabriel was morally unfit to exercise his responsibilities.

The petition which they drew up was a remarkable piece of character assassination, and it shows that the complainants had been aroused by the way in which the jati talaivan had been allocating ceremonial honours within the group. At the same time the document is presented as a case history of the headman's alleged moral impropriety. Certainly the nineteen dissidents took it for granted that the new standards of élite behaviour which the group had adopted – the focus on purity, the concern to maintain a lifestyle of piety and rigorous decorum – reflected values which they held in common with their would-be British patrons. Thus what they were hoping to demonstrate was that Dom Gabriel had engaged in behaviour which damaged the group's corporate honour and purity. These included moves which were held to distort the group's scheme of rank and precedence, as well as acts of impiety and immorality. There is no way of knowing whether these claims were justified, and it may be that the caste headman's alliance with the Panjalamkurrici poligar merely provided an added pretext for their complaints. Another possible irritant was the fact that the jati talaivan was attempting to heighten his claims of kingship and ascendancy by seeking an alliance with a group of poligar warriors whom many south Indians would identify with an 'impure' martial lifestyle. In any event what is important here is the way in which the dissidents chose to present their case.

The following are the Complaints we alledge [*sic*] against the Sady Talawen Vizt.

First that whenever he had thought proper, he has taken his Concubine into our Church, where he remained with her day and night and took his Victuals with her.

Secondly that he has in a state of inebriation entered our Church, during the time of divine service and had not only insulted us, but had also interrupted the performance of religious exercises at the regular hours.

The third item covers similar acts of alleged impropriety, and then the document goes on to refer directly to the issue of disputed caste honours:

Fourthly that whenever an event either of a Joyful or Melancholy nature happened in the Family of distinguished persons the Mamool [customary] respects observed in the Church was [*sic*] attended to by order of the Priest, but the Sady Talawen has, on the contrary, managed so as to apply for his order to observe the respects from the Church and to those who are entitled to additional respects he has curtailed it, and to those who are entitled to less, he has allowed more than warranted by Mamool – Thus he has reserved this

matter as he thought proper, and though the Saddy [*sic*] Talawen has usurped the right of the church.

The petition then turns to Dom Gabriel's alleged insults to the subordinate caste notables ('Talavamars' or *talaivans*): the dissidents were probably all lesser mejaikarar office-holders who felt themselves under threat by the allocation of new ceremonial rights and honours to the group's new trading lineages.

Fifthly that he has insulted and abused the principal Priest (who was highly esteemed for his religious Acts &c) as well as the Talavamars who are equally entitled to respect, and other respectable persons.

... Seventhly that when individuals have stated their grievances to him, as he would afford them no redress, consequently many of the Complainants were ruined. Moreover as he... takes no notice of the improper proceedings of several individuals and their refusal to submit to justice, ... and he does not counteract the enquiry made into such cases by the Talawen immediately next to him by his superior influence tho' [*sic*] unwarranted by Mamool to do so – Therefore there is an impossibility to do any thing in a regular and proper manner. In short the many maidens that remain in a state of celibacy, without being married, can only be imputed to the Sady Talawen's inattention to the representations of those concerned. ... Ignominy and dishonor [*sic*] is coming to the race...

Eighthly that he has been repeatedly found in the day time laying in the streets in a state of intoxication.

Ninthly that he has been found dancing in the streets and other public places playing on a Musical Instrument on his shoulders which was unbecoming his Situation. [*sic*]

... Thirteenth that he has without either regarding himself as the Sady Talawen, or that he should be esteemed by the people, been to the Tavern and drinking liquor.

Fourteenth that notwithstanding his being the Sady Talawen of a Tribe of people he has been carrying on a commerce with public Women, with whom he has been retiring to the Woods and other improper places. And moreover he has even enticed the wife of a man to leave him, and kept her as his Concubine... In consequence of such bad example set by a Sady Talawen several of the individual Inhabitants are for imitating it.

... On the foregoing points, it was our intention to complain of some time ago [*sic*] but... we hesitated to come forward – and he has thus conducted himself unbecomingly and basely towards our Church and Cast [*sic*] – We therefore humbly entreat of the Collector that he be suspended, and that another be appointed in his room [*sic*].<sup>73</sup>

All these lurid slanders were carefully translated, filed and entered into

<sup>73</sup> Petition signed by '19 principal inhabitants of Tuticorin' received by the Collector 4 Feb. 1799, no. 23, 4 Feb. 1799, BOR vol. 219, pp. 1258–64, TNA.

the official Proceedings of the Board of Revenue. No steps were taken though: like the Portuguese and the Dutch before them, the British committed themselves to preserving the hereditary succession to the Parava headmanship. The Parava notables settled the dispute internally. Dom Gabriel was not deposed, and when he died nine years later the Madras government followed the custom which had been established by the two previous colonial powers: the Governor issued a sanad confirming the succession of Dom Gabriel's son Dom Gaspar Antony deCruze Vaz Correia (1808-39).<sup>74</sup>

### **The return of the Jesuits**

The refounding of the Society of Jesus brought Jesuit missionaries back to the 'fishery coast' after an absence of nearly sixty years. A party of five French and Belgian Jesuits reached the Parava localities in 1837, bringing with them a new spirit of fierce reforming zeal. Within months, the Jesuits' reports on the lives and religious activities of the Paravas were couched in tones of splenetic outrage. After their long period of 'neglect' and 'isolation', they wrote, the Paravas had become 'dégénérés'. The caste's religious life was full of error and 'abuses'; they drank, gambled and engaged in unnamable vices; like the Vadakkankulam Christians whose contentious religious life will be discussed in chapter 11, they were wickedly failing to celebrate the feasts and ceremonies of the Christian calendar.<sup>75</sup>

One of the views which the fishery coast missionaries shared with many of their inland colleagues was a marked preference for Shanar converts. Unlike the commercially active Shanars of the hinterland (see below, p. 407), most of these coastal Shanars were poor toddy tappers and palmyra cultivators. To the Jesuits they were all untouched rural innocents whose simplicity and sweetness contrasted very markedly with the 'corruption' and worldliness of the Paravas. In the words of one Jesuit, Fr. Bertrand,

These poor people are astonishingly simple ['d'une simplicité étonnante']. They show affection to their [palmyra] trees as shepherds do to their sheep. . . Born at the feet of their palm trees, they know of nothing but them, and are almost strangers to the things of this world, to its delights as well as its sorrows, to its needs as well as its sins. . . Truly one would say that these good tree cultivators did not eat with Adam of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and that

<sup>74</sup> This sanad dated 3 June 1808 and all other official succession documents are in the possession of the jati talaivans' descendants, the Motha family of Tuticorin.

<sup>75</sup> Verdier, 'Mémoire', MMA.

they were created in the days of primordial innocence. Their clothing is of the greatest simplicity...<sup>76</sup>

In describing the lifestyle of the Paravas, Bertrand adopts a tone of puritanical disapproval. He gives much emphasis to the opulence and display of the great mejaikarar households, especially those of the jati talaivan and other caste notables, and the lavish ceremonial which had grown up around them. Even the gaudy splendours of the Parava churches do not impress him, despite the fact that Catholic missionaries were always denounced by their Protestant rivals as mere 'ritualists' whose love of spectacle and display led them perilously close to 'heathenish' practices.<sup>77</sup> What concerned these new Jesuit puritans was the fact that the church furnishings in Tuticorin and the other main Parava centres were found to be tattered and unkempt. This mixture of squalour and opulence was perceived as a sign of moral and spiritual degeneration; remarks of this sort were often made about the subcontinent's supposedly 'decadent' princely courts.

In the past the Paravas enjoyed the riches that were obtained for them through pearl fishing and textile trading, the two sources of wealth which were open to them. Association with the Spanish [Portuguese] led their extravagance, [a thing which is] rather common among rich Indians, towards religious matters. They concentrated their pride on their churches and on the opulence of their religious ceremonies. Sparkling in their churches one saw chalices, monstrances in solid gold, niches or sorts of tabernacles ['espèce de tabernacles'], silver candle sticks, velvet hangings... One still finds in many places, especially in Tuticorin, remains of this bygone splendour. But since the departure or death of our late fathers [the priests of the old Madurai Mission] all this is forsaken. No longer do they do anything to keep it in repair and maintain it. The church ornaments are nothing more than rich tatters which are falling to pieces ['de riches guenilles qui tombent en lambeaux'].<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Fr. Bertrand, 16 Dec. 1839, letter 30, *Lettres des nouvelles missions du Maduré*, I. Another Jesuit believed that this supposed simplicity was also reflected in the non-Christian Shanars' religious life. He reported approvingly that the Shanars of the palmyra teri, 'des gens simples, laborieux, robustes', [simple people, hardworking and robust] worshipped nothing but 'little demons' – local spirits and deities rather than the high gods of the Hindu pantheon. 'They have nothing but little demons ['de petits démons'] for gods. When one can instruct them, one has the solace of seeing them embrace Christianity rather easily.' Here the worship of the lesser Tamil divinities was thought to be a relatively easy target for missionaries: 'high' scriptural Hinduism was seen as strong and sophisticated, hence more resistant to the would-be evangelist. Fr Duranquet, 5 July 1838, letter 7, *Lettres des nouvelles missions du Maduré*, I.

<sup>77</sup> 'Romanism in India... is little more than a substitute of saints for the swamis and the Romish chapel for the heathen temple.' Report from Rev. D. Holden, 22 Jan. 1856, Madras mission reports, 1852–8/SPG Archives, London.

<sup>78</sup> Bertrand, 10 Feb. 1840, letter 35, *Lettres des nouvelles missions du Maduré*, II.

The Jesuits also maintained that the Paravas had 'reverted' to their former state of 'paganism' during the period of the Society's dissolution. What these accounts really show, however, is that in their everyday worship the Paravas still identified themselves with the broad sacred landscape of the Tamil country, and that their conversion to Christianity had never prevented them from sharing in the region's wider religious culture. It was found, for example, that Parava worshippers regularly built 'autels au demon' (demon altars).<sup>79</sup> These were evidently *pūdams*, the truncated mud or brick obelisks which are placed at sites associated with demonic spirits and divinities in Tamilnad. This suggests that many Tamil divinities, particularly local pattavans, pey spirits and ammans (goddesses) had retained an important place in the Paravas' sacred pantheon.

Furthermore, just as they continued to support their hereditary shark charmers, many Paravas also performed blood sacrifice as part of their customary life-cycle rituals. The missionaries found it particularly objectionable that women made animal sacrifices at the birth of a first-born child. This confirms the point made earlier about the Paravas' preservation of key Tamil 'Hindu' ideas relating to birth, blood and kinship. Like the prestations made to hypothetical marriage partners under the Hindu murai marriage system, these sacrificial birth rites complemented the family's Christian domestic rituals and secured a place for them within the wider dharmic order. In addition, there were indications that many Paravas had access to Hindu temples in this period, and that they often used the services of Hindu ritualists and temple functionaries. In describing the elaborate processional rites which marked the installation of a new caste headman in Tuticorin, the missionaries maintained that the Paravas borrowed elephants from a nearby temple (possibly Tirucentur) and even – 'chose honteuse!' ('a shameful thing!') – had Hindu *devadasis* or temple dancer-prostitutes ('des filles publiques') marching behind the headman's palanquin, just as in Hindu utsavam processions. It was also noted with distaste that Parava women wore iron amulets on their arms just like the local 'payennes' (pagan women). These objects were invested with protective powers by being placed in the temple of a local power divinity during the lunar eclipse: such a rite would certainly have required the participation of a Hindu ritualist.<sup>80</sup>

None of these developments came as any great surprise to the Jesuits. The Jesuit hierarchy had just begun its long-running battle against the

<sup>79</sup> Bertrand, 10 Feb. 1840, *ibid.*; Fr. J. Gury, 6 July 1839, letter 24, *ibid.*, I.

<sup>80</sup> Bertrand, 10 Feb. 1840, *ibid.*, II; Gury, 6 July 1839, *ibid.*, I; Verdier, 'Mémoire', MMA.

Goan Padroado missionaries who had moved into the old Catholic convert centres after the dissolution of the Society of Jesus. If anything the Jesuits were rather gratified to find that the Paravas had been allowed to sink into 'error' and 'depravity' while in the care of these 'mercenaires', as they called the Goan priests. If all this 'paganism' had been allowed to creep in to the coastal villages then the Padroado priests must be unfit to control Tamil churches. The Madurai mission would therefore have a strong case in its battle to establish title to its former churches and church properties. Once they were back in control, proper authority and discipline could be enforced and all these deviant practices would be wiped away.<sup>81</sup>

Since so much hinged on this question of authority, it is not surprising that the mission expressed such hostility to the Paravas' system of caste leadership. The reign of the jati talaivan was seen as an abomination, not only because of the worldliness and impropriety it was thought to foster, but because the Jesuits perceived the Paravas' caste headmanship system as denying the very essence of church power and authority. As far as the mission was concerned, the church had been degraded by the rise of the caste notables; it had come to function as a mere appendage of the caste's ceremonial ranking system, and the missionaries called for an immediate end to this 'état de servitude' (state of servitude).<sup>82</sup> What was so intolerable to the Jesuits was the fact that the hereditary caste headman was honoured as a king in the Parava localities, so that every church rite and domestic ceremony occurred at his command and under his authority, not that of the priesthood. It made no difference to the Jesuits that their own predecessors had built up the hereditary headmen and the group's system of caste-based religious organisation.

Following the example of the other Indians, they like to consider themselves to be a caste, whose honour and interests they hold very highly. . . They are not displeased to play at being royalty, and to see in their caste headman a phantom king [une ombre de roi] . . . This phantom king appoints, and consequently holds in his hand, the headmen of the various villages and thus forms a general organisation which gives him great power over this poor people.<sup>83</sup>

Again and again the Jesuit letters focus on the power and ascendancy of the jati talaivan. His journeys round the Parava population centres

<sup>81</sup> After the refounding of the Society of Jesus, the Goa-based Padroado church hierarchy was placed in authority over the Jesuits' ecclesiastical rivals. The Jesuits themselves were under the authority of the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, a new missionary body under papal control which had been created in 1622 to end the Padroado's monopoly of overseas missions.

<sup>82</sup> Verdier, 'Mémoire', MMA.

<sup>83</sup> J. Bertrand, ed., *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses de la nouvelle mission du Maduré* (2 vols., Paris, 1865), I, p. 162.

took the form of a royal progress with each local church decked out in his honour.

When the jati talaivan visits his caste's villages, they first conduct him to the church, after having carried him in triumph through all the principal streets. The bells are all ringing, the [church] statues are all unshrouded and adorned with their jewels, the altar is lit up and they sing a grand *Te Deum* in his honour.<sup>84</sup>

The Jesuits deplored these shows of deference to the 'phantom king', and they objected particularly when European priests were expected to take part. In 1839 a new jati talaivan, Dom José Antony deCruze Vaz Paldano (d. 1856) succeeded to the headmanship, and the spectacle of his coronation rites confirmed the missionaries' darkest fears. As always these ceremonies took place in the Matakovil, the church of Our Lady of Snows, and were presided over by the local Padroado priests. Following the church rites the new headman proceeded to his 'palace' where, 'seated proudly on a throne set up in his house he received there the homage of all those assembled as well as their cash offerings'.<sup>85</sup> The church's presiding priest administered a blessing in the presence of all the group's subordinate caste notables and, to the horror of the reporting missionary, he was expected to join in the rites by which these title-holders declared their fealty to the new chief headman.

Worst of all to the missionaries was the fact that the caste notables had the power to decide who was to receive the sacraments. To the Jesuits this was blasphemy. In their eyes there could be no true Christian worship unless the administration of the sacraments was preserved as the sole province of the priesthood. It was intolerable that it was the jati talaivan and not the parish priest who banned Parava worshippers from mass if they had violated the caste's code of conduct and propriety.<sup>86</sup> Further trouble was caused by the fact that the Parava caste notables had final say in matters of ceremonial rank and precedence. Since the group's internal ranking scheme was now wholly constituted through church ritual, this meant that priests were often forced to suspend the celebration of mass and defer to the jati talaivan or the village office-holders while they debated some contested point of precedence – whether a parishioner had the right to have two *Te Deums* rather than one sung at a family baptism, whether someone else was

<sup>84</sup> Verdier, 'Mémoire', MMA.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*; JT to Bishop of Mylapore (fragment) 23 June 1903, PCD; Motha, *Jathithalaimai*; Bertrand, *Lettres*, I, pp. 60, 164.

entitled to have candles lit and the church statues decked in their jewels for his family's life-cycle rites.<sup>87</sup>

By 1841 the Jesuit authorities had launched a campaign to unseat the reigning jati talaivan. The missionaries were still prepared to accept the notion of Christianity as a caste lifestyle for the Paravas, but they wanted to act as the ultimate arbiters of rank and status for the group. They would be the ones to control the caste honours system, and so the mission's aim was to install a line of caste notables who would be properly deferential to the mission and its authority and therefore equipped to enforce the purification of social and religious life which the Jesuits were seeking to impose on the Paravas.

The missionaries' main advantage was the fact that there were still growing numbers of Paravas who were eager to claim new rights and honours within the group's established ceremonial ranking scheme. Like the Shanar traders and specialist cultivators of the Tamil hinterland, the Paravas made tremendous gains at the time of the region's great nineteenth-century cotton boom. The earliest of these advances were made by the same mejaikarar trading families who had already moved into the Ceylon piece goods trade during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The group's main population centres expanded dramatically during the period of British rule. By 1845 the town of Tuticorin had become south India's largest cotton export centre; its traders' main interests were in the processing and shipping of locally grown raw cotton, but it also functioned as a regional mart for jaggery (palm sugar), fish and other Tirunelveli commodities. By the end of the century it had become the second largest port in the Madras Presidency and the fifth in British India.<sup>88</sup>

Many mejaikarar trading families were able to use their involvement in the pearl and piece goods industries as a springboard into this buoyant new cotton export trade. By the 1830s the most successful mejai traders were spending several months of the year in Ceylon; many of them were connected with commercial concerns in Madurai and other key regional market centres, and some Parava commercial men were beginning to move as far afield as Madras, Goa and the Konkan coast. Many of these long-distance traders belonged to the jati talaivan's family or to the circle of élite Tuticorin mejaikarar lineages who were allowed to intermarry with the headman's clan: with their income from trade and caste office

<sup>87</sup> Verdier, *Memoire; Lettres des nouvelles missions du Maduré*, I, pp. 200–5; II, pp. 26–7.

<sup>88</sup> Trade in Tuticorin increased ten-fold in sixty years. The town's population was put at 4,300 in 1839; 10,500 in 1871; 16,300 in 1881; 25,100 in 1891; 28,000 in 1901 and 40,200 in 1911. TCR vol. 7968/158/19 Dec. 1839, TNA; *Census of India* 1911, vol. XII, Pt 2, pp. 8–18; TCR vol. 7976/85/11 April 1848, TNA; TCR vol. 7973/244/5 Nov. 1845, TNA; Pate, *Tinnevely*, pp. 20, 447–8.

these families still had an edge over most other Parava lineages. At the same time some of the more successful traders from Manapad, Virapandiyanpatanam and other Parava localities had also established themselves in Ceylon before 1850. Like the Tuticorin traders, these migrants always maintained contact with their home villages in Tirunelveli.<sup>89</sup>

The Paravas' mobility and enterprise were described by one of the Jesuits in 1839:

For many years rich merchants ['de riches négocians'] have taken over the cotton trade, which is the only branch of industry which could provide a living [for the Paravas]. Some of them, to maintain their existence, go every year to the chank fisheries ['la pêche des coquillages'], a very laborious form of occupation which more or less furnishes their daily food. The others go every year to Colombo, Madras, Goa or elsewhere to carry on the textile trade or the profession of small scale peddling. They then return to spend the proceeds of their long expeditions with their families.<sup>90</sup>

In addition to their role as shippers and dealers, many Paravas now made gains in the areas where lower-ranking members of the group had found lucrative employment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, working once again as pilots, lightermen and cargo handlers in these expanding southern port towns. Parava labourers flocked to Tuticorin to take advantage of these new employment opportunities, and in most cases they moved into areas of employment controlled by mejaikarar magnates. They shipped on country craft owned by mejai traders; they worked in construction projects under Parava contractors, and they joined lighter crews and stevedore gangs recruited by the jati talaivan and other mejaikarar under agreements to supply labour to the shipping concerns and harbour authorities in Tuticorin and Colombo.<sup>91</sup>

All this contrasted sharply with trends in many rural areas of India where town migration and the availability of cash wages often worked to undermine the authority of caste notables and other 'traditional' élites. Among the Paravas, though, the increased demand for labour worked to confirm the position of the mejaikarar élite: the caste notables took on a new function in recruiting and channelling the kamarakkarar workforce, and this tended to reinforce their ritual and social superiority. At the same time the Madras Government still required the caste notables'

<sup>89</sup> TCR vol. 7968/158/19 Dec. 1839, TNA; TCR vol. 4717/Extract Proceedings Madras BOR/13 April 1835, TNA; TCR vol. 7958/728/13 Sept. 1839, TNA; TCR vol. 7979/130/23 July 1852, TNA.

<sup>90</sup> Fr. A. Martin, 24 June 1839, letter 22, *Lettres des nouvelles missions du Maduré*, I.

<sup>91</sup> Pate, *Timnevelly*, p. 449; Hornell, 'Report on the feasibility of operating deep-sea fishing boats on the coasts of the Madras Presidency' *Madras Fishery Investigations* 1908 (Madras, 1910), p. 50.

services in operating the pearl trade. Throughout the nineteenth-century the British administration continued the practice of ratifying the succession of each new jati talaivan. Until about 1840 this involved prestations of *khelat* or robes of office in token of the jati talaivan's status as a sovereign lord or 'little king'. The caste headman also held a variety of administrative powers such as the responsibility for collecting *moturpha* or head taxes from all Tuticorin Paravas.<sup>92</sup>

But while the established mejaikarar families made the greatest gains in this period, the nineteenth-century trade boom was so extensive that many ritually inferior kamarakkarar were able to establish themselves as small-scale local traders. Like the Shanar palmyra cultivators who had begun to do well by marketing their jaggery palm-sugar and toddy throughout the southern Tamil country at this time, the lower-ranking Paravas controlled products for which there was now a growing cash market. The demand for fresh and preserved fish was still growing rapidly in the Tamil country, and this allowed large numbers of Parava kamarakkarar to move out of fishing and labouring. Most of these new traders began as fish hawkers and then managed to enagage in new and less degrading forms of petty commodity dealing.<sup>93</sup>

As of 1839 some 10 per cent of the Tuticorin Parava population were classed as belonging to the élite mejaikarar subdivision. This was not a rigidly closed class, however. In fact by the time the Jesuits arrived in Tirunelveli the Parava élite had already found a way to accommodate this new non-mejaikarar trading population. The sort of conflicts which had flared up so spectacularly in 1799 had more or less died out at this point, and there were now few signs that the older trading and office-holding families regarded the prosperous kamarakkarar as a threat. What had happened was that the caste notables had created a new ritual which allowed sufficiently prosperous kamarakkarar to be absorbed into the mejaikarar status category. Such a scheme could have been devised only by a group with an exceptionally strong system of authority. (Hinterland localities like those which will be described in the next chapter had a much looser tradition of leadership.)

Instead of having to force his way up the local status ladder, the

<sup>92</sup> TCR vol. 7968/62/15 May 1839, TNA; TCR vol. 3595/122-123/12 March 1818, TNA. On 'kingly' *khelat* prestations see above, pp. 231-2. The British tried to adapt the symbolism of the *khelat* and *nazar* in their colonial *darbar* rituals. Thus the jati talaivan was being equated with the other 'loyal' princely magnates who had been incorporated into the British colonial network. See Cohn, 'Representing authority', p. 191.

<sup>93</sup> On Shanar occupational mobility see Ludden, *Peasant History*, pp. 46-9; Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnad. The Political Culture of a Community in Change* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969). As of 1845 Parava traders were selling cloth, spices, salt and several other commodities in the southern Tamil districts. TCR vol. 7973/258, 22-11-1845, TNA.

aspiring Parava trader simply paid a cash fee and offered up the customary signs of fealty and deference to the jati talaivan: in return he was publicly received into the caste's upper level of rank and ritual precedence. The Jesuits themselves saw how smoothly the system worked:

Any *bourgeois* [the Jesuit name for non-mejai traders] who wishes to rise must gain the good will of the jati talaivan and pay him at least 90 to 100 rupees. By this means a place at his table will be granted to him and he will be ennobled [*il sera ennoblit*: elevated to mejaikarar status].<sup>94</sup>

But what the Jesuits also observed was that there would always be some disaffected members of the group. These included Paravas who had clashed with the jati talaivan or who had been disciplined and deprived of honours by the caste notables, and kamarakkarar traders who had somehow fallen through the net of the 'ennoblement' procedure or who hoped for even speedier elevation. It was this which the missionaries were in a position to provide. As priests they alone were endowed with sacramental authority even though they and the Goan priests had been forced to share their power over church rites with the Parava caste notables. Therefore, if the missionaries could take back the initiative, their power to administer the sacraments would serve as an invaluable weapon against the jati talaivan. What the Jesuits were able to offer was a pledge to perform marriages and other church rites so that they incorporated new and hitherto unsanctioned caste honours for their chosen partisans – more bells, additional Te Deums, the unveiling of church images and all the other customary status markers in use within the group. By 1841 the mission had recruited just such a group consisting of disaffected kamarakkarar, a few aggrieved old mejaikarar traders, and, best of all, the brother of the incumbent caste headman who offered himself as a counter-jati talaivan under the patronage of the Jesuits.<sup>95</sup>

This was the first of the Jesuits' many attacks on the power and ritual primacy of the Parava jati talaivan. The immediate result was an outbreak of rioting much like those which were becoming increasingly common in many hinterland localities in this period. In this case the group allied with the Jesuits tried to press their claims for new rights and honours in the Periyakovil (the church of Our Lady of Snows) and this was then resisted by a great crowd of the jati talaivan's retainers and supporters. In the short term the mission gained very little from this campaign. The headman's brother died almost immediately and the mission's faction split apart in a squabble about who was to succeed him.

<sup>94</sup> Verdier, 'Mémoire', MMA.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

The local police authorities blamed the riot on the Jesuits and their supporters, and even more importantly, there were now several Goan Padroado priests in the region. This gave the group a choice of two rival church authorities, both backed by prestigious ecclesiastical organisations and both competing for their allegiance. In August 1841 the jati talaivan Dom José and a large group of allied Parava families broke formally with the Jesuits and proclaimed their allegiance to the Padroado church hierarchy. The local sub-magistrate confirmed this alliance, ruling that the jati talaivan was to hold sole authority over the Periyakovil, and that only Goan priests approved by the caste headman, and not the Jesuits, were to officiate in rites and festivals in the church of Our Lady of Snows.<sup>96</sup>

### Virgins and cult shrines

Through this ruling the Jesuits were barred from the Paravas' richest and most sacred shrine. But what the episode also shows is that the missionaries had acquired a shrewd grasp of the group's ceremonial honours system. Furthermore they were prepared to use this system to build up their own authority, presenting themselves as arbiters of status and caste rank in opposition to the group's established caste notables. The Jesuits were still claiming that their task was one of reform and purification. But while their professed aim was to wipe out un-Christian deviations and 'error' among the Paravas, their reforms were never intended to expunge the group's sense of caste identity, still less to integrate them with other Catholic convert groups. Like the Syrians, the Paravas retained their own churches and cult shrines throughout the colonial period.

Over the next thirty years the mission posted European priests to Manapad, Periyatalei, Virapandiyanpatanam and the other main Parava centres. Together with the Jesuits who were still based in Tuticorin, these missionaries organised recruitment campaigns which induced large numbers of Parava villagers to declare themselves adherents of the south Indian Jesuit hierarchy. These attachments were rarely permanent, but in this period there was an almost unlimited supply of aspiring mejaikarar who were willing to align themselves temporarily with the Jesuits, or at least to threaten their Goan priests and local caste notables with 'defection' as a means of pressing for new ceremonial rights and honours. As a result there were constant outbreaks in the Parava localities as quarrels over ceremonial honours and precedence and 'practical' conflicts

<sup>96</sup> On the Padroado-Jesuit clashes see the *Madras Catholic Expositor*, May 1846; Apr.-Sept. 1847; Apr.-June 1849. Verdier, 'Mémoire', MMA.

involving fishing rights and control of local markets were subsumed into contests between the Jesuits and the Goan church hierarchy.<sup>97</sup>

Despite all this unrest, it soon became clear that the Jesuits could never finally unseat the jati talaivan as long as he continued to function as the Paravas' sole lord and princely patron, an undisputed 'little king' controlling the group's most important rights and honours from his seat of power in the Periyakovil (the church of Our Lady of Snows.) In 1848 the missionaries thought that they had finally cracked the problem when they forged ties with yet another would-be caste headman. This time their client notable was Viagula Motha, a Parava from Vembar whose family had been modestly successful as dubashes or local agents of the Dutch East India Company. Although they were better off than most kamarakkarar labourers and fishermen, the lineage had failed to do well in the region's new cotton export trade, and they had ceased to be recognised as genuine mejaikarar. What the Jesuits offered was the chance for this lineage to play the role of great patrons and benefactors just like the jati talaivan. The mission announced that it was going to build a new Jesuit-run church at a distance of about half a mile from the church of Our Lady of Snows, and that the Jesuits' protégé family the Mothas were to donate the plot of ground on which it was to be built. The hope was that this new church would become a ceremonial focus to outshine the Periyakovil, and that in time every non-mejai Parava family in Tuticorin would look to the head of the Motha clan as their new 'little king'.<sup>98</sup>

When it was completed in 1864 the new foundation was dedicated to 'les Saints Coeurs de Jesus et de Marie' (the sacred hearts of Jesus and Mary). With much fanfare the mission announced that the church was to have the status of a cathedral, but this plan to overshadow the church of Our Lady of Snows was an abject failure. As far as the population of Tuticorin was concerned the so-called cathedral was always to be known under the humiliatingly dismissive title of the '*cinnakōvil*' – the lesser or little church. The Jesuits gave Viagula Motha pre-eminent rights and honours in the new 'cathedral' so that he could be seen to function like the real jati talaivan. But, apart from Viagula's immediate family, even the Jesuits' own affiliates refused to regard this rival Jesuit shrine as an arena in which to mark out relationships of rank and primacy within the caste.

<sup>97</sup> Fr. Francis Xavier Costa (Goan priest based in Periyatalei) to Collector, petition dated 24 July 1847, PCD; *Archives de la nouvelle mission du Maduré*, I, MMA; Denis Guchen, *Cinquante ans au Maduré: 1837–1887. Récits et souvenirs*, (2 vols., Trichinopoly, 1887–9), I, pp. 199–215; Alexis Canoz, 'Mémoire sur l'état actuel de la mission du Maduré – 1850: origine de la mission – obstacles suscités par le [Jésuit v. Padroado] schisme' (n.d.) Typescript copy of original report, MMA.

<sup>98</sup> Gomez, *Pictorial Souvenir*, p. v; Guchen, *Cinquante ans*, I, p. 49.

It was not the abode of a great tutelary figure like Our Lady of Snows, and thus it has always remained a place of little account in the town's sacred and ceremonial geography. For all local Paravas, the Periyakovil was still the only important reference point in the caste's ceremonial ranking system.<sup>99</sup>

What all this suggests is that the Paravas now possessed two different types of cult saint. Like St Thomas in his role as patron and protector of the Syrians, the Tuticorin Virgin was a community saint, a tutelary being whose cult provided a focus for the Paravas and their scheme of hierarchical rank and office. St Francis Xavier also performed certain tutelary functions for the Paravas: in Manapad particularly, he provided the Paravas with internal reference points which they have used for centuries to underpin their system of caste rank and office. But the Xavier tradition never acquired the same princely trappings as the cults of Our Lady of Snows and the Syrians' St Thomas. It was the Virgin who became a divinely mandated sovereign: she and not St Francis Xavier became tied to the pre-eminence of the Paravas' chief caste notables, and therefore she alone became a figure of transcendent power and majesty for the group. Unlike many other south Indian cult figures then, this Virgin's sacred network has never expanded beyond Tuticorin, headquarters of the Parava caste headmen and the central point in the group's corporate sacred landscape.

Over the centuries since the mass conversion of the 'fishery coast' population, Kanniyakumari and several other Parava localities have also acquired local cult virgins whose feasts were transformed into displays of rank and primacy for the group's caste notables. Here too, these Parava virgin cults have been bound up in much the same way with the workings of the group's internal honours system. As a result the domain of the Parava virgins has never extended beyond the precincts of these key coastal shrines and their adjacent procession streets, and even in recent years the Tuticorin Virgin has attracted relatively few non-Parava devotees. It is true that worshippers from many communities attend the great Tuticorin Pon Ter Vizhas (Golden Car festivals) but the sponsors and chief celebrants of these events were and still are Paravas.

This is an exceptional situation. Elsewhere in south India Christian virgin cults have attracted a much wider-ranging clientele. At the celebrated shrine of Our Lady of Health at Velankanni (six miles south of Nagapattinam on the Tanjore coast) worshippers from all castes and religious communities share in the cult of the shrine's miraculous local Virgin. This shrine is famous for its powers of healing and exorcism, and

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

is thought to have been a popular pilgrimage place since the early seventeenth century. According to local tradition the shrine was not founded by missionaries, but by a group of devotees who had formed up around an image of the Virgin possessing miraculous medicinal powers. One key difference here is that the Velankanni Virgin was never identified with the caste lifestyle of any single convert community. It first began to acquire regional importance at the end of the nineteenth century, when the Roman Catholic church in south India was fighting to break down the power of the Paravas' caste notables, and was seeking to replace the ritualised form of caste-based cult worship practised by the Paravas with more popular and broadly-based religious forms.<sup>100</sup>

The paradox here is that the Velankanni Virgin is wholly unlike the benign and protective Virgin patroness of Tuticorin, and so one might have expected her to be much less acceptable to the missionaries. Our Lady of Health is a warrior and conqueror. Her devotees identify her quite specifically with the fierce amman goddesses of Tamilnad, and her cult legends use the term *sakti* to describe her endowment of supernatural power: this terminology is not applied to Our Lady of Snows. The origins of the Tuticorin Virgin are well known to her devotees, and the local foundation accounts consist of a straightforward narrative which describes the despatch of the cult statue from its home church in Manila. It is carried by sea to Punneyakayal and then sent on by Padroado officials to Tuticorin. This contrasts strongly with foundation accounts from Velankanni, all of which contain a rich mixture of Hindu and Christian motifs. There are episodes in the site's official histories in which the Virgin reveals herself to her devotees through miraculous gushings of blood and milk, a familiar motif in Tamil *stalapurana* (temple history) literature. The oral versions of the Velankanni legend connect the Virgin even more explicitly with the surrounding Hindu sacred landscape. Officials who conduct pilgrims around the site declare that the basilica was built on the site of an existing amman temple. According to one published foundation account, the Virgin established herself at Velankanni after triumphing in a bloody battle against this reigning Tamil goddess.<sup>101</sup>

For all her power and transcendence Our Lady of Snows is an immobile figure. Her range and appeal have been comparatively limited, and unlike the Velankanni Virgin she has not been an active and expansive

<sup>100</sup> Meersman, *Franciscans in Tamilnad*, pp. 71–81; S.R. Santos, *The Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Health Vailankanni* [pamphlet], 11th edn (Tanjavur, 1980).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* Velankanni is best known for its 'museum' displaying cast-off crutches and gilded kidney stones donated by grateful devotees. Hindu-style tonsuring rituals are carried out at the shrine; worshippers also receive distributions of *prasatam*.

cult saint associated with the creation of new sacred networks and the absorption or 'conquest' of new subject-devotees. This category of dynamic conquest saints clearly excludes the Tuticorin Virgin, but it does include the figure of St Francis Xavier as well as Muslim saint-conquerors such as Yusuf Khan, Baba Fakiruddin and the Nagore pir Shahul Hamid. As has already been seen, these real or semi-historical Muslim personalities were also part of a mobile and dynamic tradition of worship. For centuries new groups of devotees were continually being recruited into these cult traditions, and the cults themselves tended to expand and develop across wide expanses of territory far beyond their original dargah or home shrine. This was precisely the process which took place in the case of the Francis Xavier cult. This too was a tradition which grew and travelled with its devotees; once again the widening of commercial and geographical networks gave new life and power to the tradition of south Indian cult-saint worship.<sup>102</sup>

### **Parava honours disputes in the later nineteenth century**

Once the missionaries realised that their new Sacred Heart church was never going to become the group's paramount shrine, they had no choice but to back another campaign to gain control of the church of Our Lady of Snows. In 1875, a group of the Jesuits' affiliated kamarakkarar (non-élite) families filed a suit demanding the right to take marriage and funeral processions through the four streets which formed the boundary of the Periyakovil compound. For the Paravas these streets had acquired much the same significance as the procession route surrounding most south Indian temples. As the group came to focus more and more on principles of rank and hierarchy, the right to stage marriage and funeral processions along this route had been accepted as yet another sign of superior mejaikarar status.<sup>103</sup>

Once more the Jesuits failed: as in many of the region's other disputes over procession routes and shrine precincts, the court ruled that the church and its procession route were to be regarded as private property rather than a public right of way as the plaintiffs had claimed. As a result, the judgement stated that the Padroado authorities and the jati talaivan (Dom José's son and successor Dom Gabriel deCruze Vaz Paldano, in office 1856–89) had the right to exclude anyone they chose from its

<sup>102</sup> Margaret Egnore, 'On the meaning of "Sakti" to women in Tamil Nadu', p. 5, in S.S. Wadley, ed., *The Power of Tamil Women*. Foreign and Comparative Studies, South Asian Series, No. 6, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University (Syracuse, 1980), pp. 1–34.

<sup>103</sup> Memorial to the Bishop of Mylapore, Colombo 7 Oct. 1928 from 'the Special Committee of Padroado Christians' [M.J. Carvalho, J.A.D. Victoria and others], p. 4, PCD.

precincts. But here too these clashes helped to create a desire for firmer and more formal boundaries between groups which had once had the character of open, loosely structured status categories. This was a development which was mirrored in a number of hinterland localities at this time, most notably in the southeastern Tamil village of Vadakkankulam, as chapter 11 will show. What happened amongst the Paravas was that in 1873 the Jesuits' Tuticorin kamarakkarak supporters had expressed their defiance of the jati talaivan by taking over two semi-derelict eighteenth-century chapels and building three-foot barriers around them. The jati talaivan made furious attempts to block this move. The Jesuit cathedral had no real standing in the Paravas' status system, but all the other holy places of Tuticorin were key landmarks in the caste headman's domain. If he was to survive as 'little king' – 'King of the Bharatha dynasty', 'lineal' descendant of the noble Bharathar Kings' – then he must continue to command the town's shrines and churches. No-one could be allowed to wall off an established Parava shrine, even a semi-ruined one: to do so was to hive off a part of the caste headman's realm, and thus to begin the dismemberment of his kingdom.<sup>104</sup>

In the end, the Collectorate officials ruled against the jati talaivan in the case of the two chapels. Nevertheless, his victory in the suit involving the Periyakovil procession street cancelled out this lesser defeat, and when this result was announced it was his turn to build walls. Here the point was to retake the initiative from the Jesuit's partisans by walling off the Periyakovil compound; this served to drive home the rival group's exclusion from the church's procession precincts. The Jesuits' protégés went all the way to the High Court with a suit demanding the demolition of this new barrier. When they finally lost the case in May 1877 a crowd of angry kamarakkarak tried to force their way into the compound during a local saint-cult festival. The jati talaivan's men fought back, and the result was another fierce outbreak of rioting.<sup>105</sup>

Interestingly this wall-building trend coincided with some of the Paravas' most violent anti-Shanar clashes. It was noted before that the deepening of caste divisions was part of the Paravas' shift to a more

<sup>104</sup> MS draft letter from JT to Head Assistant Collector, Tuticorin, n.d. [1873] PCD; extract from Proceedings of the Tuticorin Municipal Commissioner, 5 April 1873 – copy in PCD. Compare the accounts of nineteenth-century Shanar campaigns to gain access to temple streets and other privileged precincts in Ludden, *Peasant History*, pp. 188–96; R. Frykenberg, 'On roads and riots in Tinnevely', *South Asia* (n.s.) 4:2 (1982), pp. 34–52.

<sup>105</sup> Madras High Court Suit 574/1876, quoted in MS draft letter from 'Parava Padroado Christians, Tuticorin' to Bishop of Mylapore, 1 June 1894 [? damaged text] PCD; *Archives de la nouvelle mission du Maduré*, I, MMA.

hierarchical form of caste organisation. Now what was happening was that the coastal Shanars were also becoming honours-conscious, just like their fellow Shanars in the Tamil hinterland. Often this came about because they had been drawn, perhaps involuntarily, into the Paravas' own honours disputes. In Periyatalei for example a body of Paravas who controlled large holdings of land and palmyra trees had claimed affiliation with the Jesuits during the 1850s. In 1859 their rivals from the Goa faction attacked this group's Hindu and Christian Shanar tenants and drove them from their holdings in the neighbouring Shanar hamlet. Events of this sort became increasingly common over the next twenty years. The result was that the Shanars too – once praised by the missionaries for their supposedly simple egalitarian lifestyle – began to focus on honour and status in their own right and to contest their Parava overlords' claims of ritual primacy.<sup>106</sup>

### **The jati talaivan under fire**

The next set of developments took place after the period of economic decline and dislocation which culminated in south India's famine and distress years of 1877–8. During the 1880s and 1890s the Parava localities were caught up in yet another great maritime trading boom which was stimulated by the dramatic growth of the Ceylon plantation economy. Many established Parava traders simply increased their profits from shipping and cargo broking as the overseas export market began to pick up again. During the 1880s, many mejaikarar made significant gains as contractors for the Colombo harbour authorities. Usually these men were from families who had been involved in recruiting labourers for major mid-nineteenth-century public works projects such as the Tuticorin harbour works. Tuticorin's best known magnate family, the Roche-Victorias, began their rise as harbour contractors in Ceylon in about 1885.<sup>107</sup>

There were also families who made their first move into the Ceylon trading networks at this time, amassing large fortunes as suppliers of foodstuffs, liquor and textiles to Ceylon's fast-growing population of Tamil plantation workers. Most of these new maritime traders were men like J.M.S. Miranda of Manapad (1855–1911). Like the aspiring mejaikarar of the 1830s and 1840s, this Parava magnate began as a local boat-owner and small-scale piece goods trader hawking his goods in the

<sup>106</sup> MS petition from Goan priest, Periyatalei, 24 Jan. 1847, PCD; *Archives de la nouvelle mission du Maduré*, I, MMA; Guchen, *Cinquante ans*, I, pp. 199–205; Canoz, 'Mémoire sur l'état actuel de la Mission du Maduré – 1850', MMA.

<sup>107</sup> Interviews with Roche-Victoria family, Tuticorin, Aug. 1977; K.M. De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (London, 1981), pp. 282–96.

villages around Manapad and Kanniyakumari. He then married into the family of S.S. Fernando, a Manapad Parava who had just started a commercial venture in Ceylon. By 1900 their joint textile importing concern was one of the most successful of all Ceylon-based Parava businesses. They and the other Manapad traders of this generation returned from Ceylon and built the showy European-style houses which became the village's best known landmark. Both the missionaries and the region's colonial administrators perceived the locality as a monument to the virtues of enterprise and economic self-advancement.<sup>108</sup>

As a result of all these developments more kamarakkarar than ever before began to campaign for enhanced rank and honours. Even at this stage the group's established status system was far from being seriously undermined by the clashes and outbreaks which had been going on for the past thirty years. However, in 1889 the incumbent jati talaivan Dom Gabriel died without leaving a male heir, and the resulting crisis of leadership gave the Jesuits their best opportunity yet to attack the primacy of the group's independent caste headmen. While the various branches of the headman's family were still battling over the succession, the Jesuits lent their support to a group of kamarakkarar families who had taken the unprecedented step of constructing their own ceremonial emblems for use in marriage processions and other life-cycle ceremonies.<sup>109</sup>

Up to now the all-important caste banners, torches and other insignia had been in the exclusive possession of the jati talaivan. Families who wished to make use of them had had to apply to the caste headman; there was a fee to be paid for the privilege of using the insignia, and a customary prestation which signified the applicants' fealty to their lord and 'little king'. If the jati talaivan agreed to supply the caste regalia, he was using his power to declare that the families in question were entitled to caste honours, that they were persons of good and proper standing within the moral community, and that they were known not to have offended against the caste's code of conduct and propriety. Such decisions were made by the adappans and other local notables in localities outside Tuticorin, all of which had their own replicas of the Tuticorin headman's regalia. It was a measure of the group's exceptional cohesion and solidarity that disputed decisions in such cases were regularly put to the jati talaivan for final adjudication.<sup>110</sup>

Again there were always disaffected families who had received

<sup>108</sup> Interviews, Manapad and Tuticorin, Aug.-Sept. 1977.

<sup>109</sup> JT to Collector, Tuticorin, 24 July 1889, PCD; 'The Bharathars of Tuticorin' to Jesuit authorities (printed memorial) 29 Sept. 1891, PCD.

<sup>110</sup> E.g. JT to Bishop of Mylapore 23 June 1903, PCD; Motha, *Jathithalaimai*.

unfavourable rulings from the caste notables or who hoped to push beyond the established limits of the system. No-one had ever constructed new ceremonial insignia before, and so the dissident group had appropriated one of the chief rights of the ruling headman. To make the challenge even more dramatic these Jesuit protégés recruited a group of Parava caste barbers and persuaded them to carry the new unauthorised regalia in their marriage and funeral processions.<sup>111</sup> These barbers were key people within the group's network of ritualised service transactions. Once again this was a denial of the caste headman's standing and authority: ever since the Paravas had established their princely model of caste organisation it had been up to the jati talaivan to command the service of the caste's dependent client groups.

The Jesuits then made their contribution to the campaign: they reopened the issue of access to the Periyakovil precincts by petitioning the municipality to open the Tuticorin procession streets to their kamarakkarar affiliates. The mission could thus offer its adherents the hope of taking marriage and funeral processions, complete with caste banners and regalia, into the church of Our Lady of Snows itself, a privilege which none of them had ever held before.<sup>112</sup>

Again this campaign had rapid repercussions in almost all the other Parava localities. Villagers who had been disciplined for local offences took the opportunity to defy punishments imposed by the adappans and sittattis, claiming that the headman's status was now in doubt, and that his representatives in the villages had therefore lost their authority as well. In 1891, for example, the caste records show that thirteen families in Kadaladai defied an order from the jati talaivan forbidding them to market their fish. The families refused to pay their kanikkai dues (customary payments to the caste notables) declaring that 'those who wish to honour the jati talaivan in such a way might do so, but others need not – it is no longer compulsory'.<sup>113</sup> (This new jati talaivan was Dom Gabriel deCruze Lazarus Motha Vaz, in office 1889–1914. The 1889 succession dispute had ended with the installation of the son of the previous caste headman's daughter: because of his descent through the female line many Paravas, especially disaffected groups allied with the Jesuits, maintained that the new headman's succession was invalid.)

The Jesuits then backed all these village rebels by forbidding any Parava family who was affiliated with the mission from making use of the jati talaivan's caste insignia. They also banned all gestures of respect and

<sup>111</sup> JT to Bishop of Mylapore (MS draft) 1 June 1894, PCD.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Report to JT from Thommai Antony Fernando (adappan) 1891 (date partly obscured) PCD.

deference to the caste notables. As has already been seen, it had long been customary to make offerings of betel-nut to the jati talaivan and the other caste notables on the occasion of marriages and other key ceremonies. Once these signs of deference had been made, the local office-holders would endorse the ritual and thus secure its validity. This was just the sort of 'interference' in sacramental rites which the Jesuits had been seeking to abolish: now they made such prestations punishable by public penances and even excommunication for persistent 'offenders'.<sup>114</sup> By 1893 these sanctions had alarmed the jati talaivan so deeply that he wrote to the Papal Legate imploring him to intercede with the Jesuit mission authorities: 'You must not countenance my enemies who are cherished by them [the Jesuits] and in short to allow my banners and torches to be used by their mission Christians as heretofore without subjecting them to any restriction or inconvenience.'<sup>115</sup>

At this point the Jesuits devised an even more dramatic means of superseding the caste headman. In May 1894 they inaugurated a new processional festival to mark the feast of St Fidelis of Sigmaringen, a seventeenth-century Capuchin who is revered as the first martyr of the Congregation de Propaganda Fide.<sup>116</sup> Fidelis was a saint who had previously played no part in the religious life of the south Indian convert groups. No feast in his honour had ever been celebrated by the Paravas, and it is clear that the intention was just the same as in the case of the building of the Jesuits' rival 'cinnakovil' cathedral. Here too the missionaries had intended to create a new focus for Parava ceremonial, using a site which could be controlled by the Jesuits and through them by their Parava clients. This earlier attempt had therefore been an exercise in domain-building. The missionaries' substitute jati talaivan was to be vested with power like the Paravas' real 'little king', and the proof of this sovereign standing was to be his right to rule as lord of the new Jesuit cathedral. In the event the Jesuits had found it impossible to use any site but the church of Our Lady of Snows (the Periyakovil) to construct a viable realm for their would-be jati talaivan, and so they took care not to make the same mistake again. Although they were introducing a new cult saint into the Paravas' religious system the rite itself was designed to take place within the arena of the Periyakovil and its procession route, and it was devised specifically to imitate and supplant the Periyakovil's great

<sup>114</sup> JT to Msgr. Zaleski, papal legate, 23 Oct. 1893, PCD; Michael Anthony, *kaṭṭalaikāran* (Jesuit-nominated lay office-holder) of Alandalei to JT, 3 July 1891, PCD.

<sup>115</sup> JT to Papal Legate, 23 Oct. 1893, PCD.

<sup>116</sup> Guchen, *Cinquante ans*, I, p. 49; JT to Bishop of Mylapore (damaged fragment) Tuticorin, 15 May 1894, PCD. Fidelis was sent by the *Propaganda* to reconvert the Zwignians; he was martyred in 1622.

annual Golden Car festival. The key difference was that once again, the missionaries were choosing the families who were to act as chief donors and sponsors of the festival: their nominees were members of the same kamarakkarar lineages who had been making bids to take marriage and funeral processions through the Periyakovil 'car' streets.

These donors arranged for the construction of a huge glass-panelled ter (procession chariot) patterned on the Periyakovil's Golden Car vehicle. In it was placed a certified relic of St Fidelis, which the mission had specially obtained from Rome. The rite was then planned as a gigantic gesture of defiance against the caste headman: with musicians and caste barbers carrying flags, *capparams* (processional image platforms) and the disputed unofficial caste emblems, the celebrants planned to drag their new ter along the whole length of the Periyakovil procession route, establishing themselves once and for all as masters of the caste's most potent sacred precinct. The result was one of the most violent street battles in the community's history. The dissident kamarakkarar tried to force their way into the Periyakovil compound with their ter and regalia. Hundreds of the jati talaivan's supporters then attacked the procession. Fighting broke out; the crowd stoned the capparams with their crucifixes and sacred images, and, in the words of the jati talaivan, 'there occurred a serious riot just at the northern gate of our compound with pelting of stones on either side in which the cars [capparams] containing statues of the Saints and the big glass car containing the Relic of Lord Fedelis [*sic*: St Fidelis] were hit with stones and suffered breakage and damage to the great scandal of the Tuticorin Christians'.<sup>117</sup>

Despite the violence and the expensive court cases which followed the riot, over the next few years the mission continued to encourage its supporters to repudiate the jati talaivan and press for the right to carry their own emblems in the Periyakovil precincts. As before, this disaffection spread to the outlying villages. In some localities where these confrontations overlapped with local honours disputes, this worked against the mission's interests. It has already been seen, for example, that in this period a group of village dissidents in Kanniyakumari renounced their Jesuit affiliation and declared temporary allegiance to the notorious 'Mar Julius' (the renegade Goan cleric Antonio Francisco-Xavier Alvares who had been consecrated a bishop of the St Thomas Christian church in 1888: see above, chapter 8).

In general the mission's campaign worked to erode the authority of the jati talaivan and his local caste notables. In Sippikulam a large group of families defied the local adappans: the group had been found guilty of

<sup>117</sup> JT to Bishop of Mylapore, 15 May 1894.

various misdemeanours and the notables had tried to punish them by withholding the caste regalia during their wedding ceremonies.<sup>118</sup> In another centre, dissident families circumvented a similar order by borrowing ceremonial banners and insignia from the Jesuits' partisans in two neighbouring Parava villages.<sup>119</sup> For the first time, the village adappans and pattangattis began to suggest that the power and prestige of the jati talaivan was on the verge of collapse. In one of many such letters from this period the pattangatti of Kutapuzhi pleaded with the jati talaivan to act as a true 'little king' before it was too late, to assert himself once more as an arbitrator and preserver of peace and order among the Paravas.

Your highness must pass strict orders as regards the offerings to your kind self from every village. The amount should be definitely noted. . . For auspicious functions such as marriages and funerals, betel-nut should be distributed in the name of Your Highness and then only according to custom. Unless people of our community pay heed to your conditions you need not work for their welfare and save them from riots and calamities done to them by other communities.<sup>120</sup>

There was little to be done, however. Soon even the Goa-based Padroado priests who had previously been keen supporters of the jati talaivan had begun to repudiate the caste elders' authority over churches and festival rites. Following the example of the Jesuits, they too had finally decided that they were in a position to wield full sacramental authority without bowing to the will of the Parava headman and notables. The priest in charge of Manapad's Padroado church of the Holy Ghost was one of the first Goan clerics to reject the old alliance with the jati talaivan. In 1896 he issued a proclamation claiming sole power over church revenues and properties under Padroado authority and declared,

The Metropolitan Bishop [of Mylapore: headquarters of Padroado authority in the Madras Presidency] has conferred on me triple powers over the caste, village and church. For using community emblems, using musicians, torches, distributing betel-nut and other such rites ensuring marriages and funerals, permission must be obtained from me. No-one should regard the jati talaivan as head of the jati.<sup>121</sup>

Ignoring cries of outrage from the jati talaivan, the Padroado authorities in Tuticorin began a campaign to wrest control of churches

<sup>118</sup> Adappan of Sippikulam to JT, 10 June 1895, PCD.

<sup>119</sup> Fragment of MS letter to JT (village name obliterated) 11 Oct. 1895, PCD. Similar challenges to the caste notables are described in letters from the 'Villagers of Manapad' to JT, 5 Aug. 1894, PCD; and from 'Villagers' of Periyatalei to JT (date obliterated, c. Oct. 1894) PCD.

<sup>120</sup> Susai, pattangatti of Kutapuzhi to JT, 17 Aug. 1895, PCD.

<sup>121</sup> Manapad caste notable, signature obliterated, to JT, 11 July 1896, PCD.

and caste symbols from the old élite. In 1901 the Periyakovil's presiding priest moved to overturn the jati talaivan's most jealously guarded marks of status, including the right to sit in his special seat near the Sanctuary during Mass.<sup>122</sup> These setbacks in the ritual sphere soon began to undermine the jati talaivan's control of the caste's occupational activities. A pearling official reported in 1900 that the caste headman's loss of prestige and ceremonial power had damaged his control over the Parava pearl and chank divers. The officer noted that the divers were no longer under their old tight discipline and that they were prone to strike work on frivolous pretexts.<sup>123</sup>

The last formally installed Parava jati talaivan assumed office in 1926 at a time of fierce debate over the nature and validity of the headmanship. By this time the group had thrown up as many as eight or ten competing 'caste associations'. This was a term used to describe the self-professed community welfare and service societies which sprang up all over the subcontinent between about 1880 and 1935. The emergence of such bodies was once taken as a sign of the so-called modernisation of the south Asian caste system; more recently their founding has been seen as a short-term ploy by district-level politicians seeking credibility in the eyes of the colonial authorities.<sup>124</sup> In the case of the Paravas these caste associations were all controlled by rival mejaikarar trading families, and, because this was the sort of language which guaranteed such groups a hearing in British official circles, they all claimed to speak on behalf of the 'Bharatha nation' in the name of progress and corporate 'uplift'. Like all the other organisations of this kind these were unstable and evanescent organisations. While they lasted, though, they made a number of attempts to usurp or redefine the role of the jati talaivan, and this too tended to erode confidence in the authority of the caste notables.<sup>125</sup>

Throughout this period the more successful of the aspiring kamarakkarar trading families – most of them affiliated to the Jesuits – struggled inconclusively for supremacy within the group's status system. This internal ranking scheme still hinged on access to the Periyakovil and the allocation of caste 'honours', although the jati talaivan had now lost much of his authority over the system. The last vestiges of the old caste headmanship system finally disintegrated in the decades after the Second World War. From the mid-1940s, the distinction between élite traders and the mass of poor, ritually inferior fishermen finally became obsolete:

<sup>122</sup> JT to Bishop of Mylapore (MS draft) Tuticorin, July 1901, PCD.

<sup>123</sup> Report in Madras BOR proceedings 2081/12 Oct. 1900; BOR Proceedings 534/22 Aug. 1890/copies in PCD.

<sup>124</sup> D.A. Washbrook, 'Development of Caste Organisation', pp. 150–203. See Roche, *Fishermen of the Coromandel Coast*, pp. 141–87.

<sup>125</sup> *Milestones in Bharatha Progress*.

the introduction of refrigeration, nylon nets and motor-powered fishing boats made the once humble occupation of sea fishing far more lucrative than ever before. Once the *mejaikarar* – *kamarakkarar* division lost its remaining economic basis, the *jati talaivan* could no longer function effectively as a source of endorsement for upwardly mobile *kamarakkarar*. Since the early 1970s, the forced repatriation of Tamil traders from Sri Lanka has destroyed the all-important trading connection which had formerly enriched and sustained the old Parava élite.

Today the group no longer operates as a tightly integrated economic and social unit. Even so the festival of Our Lady of Snows still takes place at regular intervals, and it still provides an important ceremonial focus for the group. Since the last war, however, the most prosperous *kamarakkarar*, particularly families involved in the processing and export of frozen prawns, have taken over the signs of ritual pre-eminence once held by the *jati talaivan*. Thus in recent years the head of the richest of these one-time fishing lineages was the man who gave the first symbolic pull to the Golden Car at the start of the festival, and this magnate has acted as chief donor in the rites accompanying the festival of Our Lady of Snows.<sup>126</sup>

The case of the Paravas can perhaps be seen as standing midway between that of the Syrians and the unorganised devotional Christianity which will be discussed in the next chapter. The Christianity of the Syrians acted as a tradition which confirmed and enhanced the group's dual status as warriors and persons of high ceremonial rank. Their position in Malayali society was maintained at least into the nineteenth century through the redistribution of royal 'honours'; it was not until their links with the state were severed that they became a separate community, increasingly placed outside Kerala's high-caste martial tradition. The case of the Paravas provides an example of caste formation around a central body of Christian symbols which transformed the group's ideology but maintained them within the broader system of ranking within Tamil society. Though Christian, the Paravas' relations to Hindu rulers and to lower caste servants and agricultural groups were similar to those of many formally Hindu and Muslim commercial and artisan populations. The next chapter proceeds to examine the social role of Christianity in the unsettled hinterland of south India. This was a region in which sect formation amongst Christians paralleled the growth of sectarian *bhakti* cults amongst professing Hindus, as well as the formation of *pir* cults amongst those who came to be identified as Muslims.

<sup>126</sup> Violent 'honours' disputes are still a feature of the group's festivals: a typical example (in Feb. 1979) is cited in S.V. Fernando, 'The Portuguese patronage (Padroado) and the evangelization of the pearl fishery coast', p. 104, *ICHR* 18:2, (1984), pp. 94–105.

*Christian saints and gurus in the poligar country*

**New hinterland cult traditions**

Thus far Christianity has appeared here as a religion of coastal people, of élite Malayali warrior-landholders, and of Tamil-speaking fishermen and seaborne traders. Two sets of questions must be asked at this point. First, how did Christian worship spread into the Tamil hinterland, and why did so much of south India's inland population, most notably the Shanar toddy tappers, Paraiyan labourers and other low-ranking agricultural groups of the Tamil plains country, come to be hailed in missionary circles as one of the largest and most successful 'mission fields' in the subcontinent?

Secondly, what was the nature of the Christian religious tradition which developed in the Tamil hinterland? The Paravas were a fairly coherent and stable group with tendencies to hierarchy which arose partly from the intermittent church discipline which was imposed on them, but more importantly from trends within their pre-existing Tamil religious and social background. The combination of tightknit organisation and hierarchy which characterised the Paravas was also typical of many other specialist occupational groups in the sub-continent, particularly coastal groups and inhabitants of the rich rice-growing valley regions. In the drier and more volatile Tamil hinterland, too, Christian and Hindu worship came to share many of the same forms, rites and concepts. Once again the dynamics of this Christian worship came to reflect the society around it, even when more formal Christian values were articulated by the various convert groups. In this case the Christians of the hinterland generated a form of volatile bhakti or devotional worship of a type which was characteristic of their more numerous Hindu neighbours. They also showed a strong proclivity to violent disputes over religious 'honours'. This too was a feature of the rapidly changing inland societies of south India.

By the middle of the sixteenth century the Portuguese Padroado had established a highly organised Roman Catholic missionary network along the south Indian coastline. There were missionary-run churches in the Tamil hinterland by the end of the seventeenth century, and during the

nineteenth century Protestant and Catholic missionaries operating in the Tamil hinterland claimed the credit for converting tens of thousands of local people to Christianity. It may come as a surprise then to find that the initial spread of Christianity in the region did not result from a campaign of centrally directed missionary proselytising. What really occurred was something much more like the gradual dissemination of Muslim cult traditions. Here too there was a long period in which small groups of devotees formed around charismatic individuals and cult shrines, acquiring only a very limited appreciation of the textual or doctrinal side of Christianity. A pattern of shifting and evanescent affiliation was the norm here, and those who attached themselves to these teachers and holy men did not necessarily become members of a formally constituted church under European ecclesiastical authority. In this early period of hinterland devotional activity, knowledge of Christian motifs and symbols was transmitted along indigenous networks of trade and pilgrimage, and it was not until considerably later – often not until the second half of the eighteenth century – that the region's foreign missionary organisations began to incorporate and institutionalise these centres of autonomous Christian cult worship.

According to contemporary Jesuit records, the coastal regions of Malabar and Tamilnad contained some 45,000 baptised Roman Catholics at the end of the sixteenth century, mostly Paravas, Mukkuvas and other low-ranking fishing and labouring people.<sup>1</sup> It was from these groups that Tamils in inland localities acquired their earliest exposure to Christian ideas and observances: once again, as in the case of the coming of Islam to south India, it was the coastal trading people who took the lead in disseminating and popularising the new cult traditions. It has been noted that there were Parava traders in the Tamil hinterland by the end of the sixteenth century; the early Jesuit letters list over thirty inland localities in which Paravas had established trading bases by the middle of the seventeenth century. Like the south Indian Muslims whose Sufi cult networks had followed the path of their long-distance trading forays, the Paravas brought their saint cults with them when they moved outside their home territories. This certainly appears to be the way in which the St Francis Xavier cult was transmitted to new devotees in the Tamil hinterland: the first missionaries to penetrate the area found that there were already shrines to St Francis in a number of inland localities, long

<sup>1</sup> The figures do not include the St Thomas Christians who probably numbered 150,000 to 200,000 in this period. J.C. Houpert, *A South Indian Mission: the Madura Catholic Mission from 1535–1935*, 2nd edn (Trichinopoly, 1937), p. 22.

before the establishment of the first formal missionary bases in the region.<sup>2</sup> New Hindu cults were often extended by similar means.

Much can be deduced about the early spread of Christian cult traditions in the inland plains country from a series of local family histories which were collected and transcribed by an Indian-born Jesuit at the beginning of this century.<sup>3</sup> Included in this compilation is an account of the origins of a Tirunelveli Catholic family who trace their descent from a population of Hindu scribal and landholding Vellalas from the old fort-mart town of Kamanayakanpatti. This was one of the main strategic and commercial centres in the poligar chiefdom of Ettaiyapuram. Jesuits from Madurai were beginning to tour in this area as early as the mid-1640s, and there is a specific reference to Kamanayakanpatti in a Jesuit report of 1666. The family in question probably had some connection with these missionaries; by 1688 a Jesuit was actually residing in Kamanayakanpatti.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the presence of European missionaries in the region, the text does not describe anything like a conventional religious conversion for the family. The Jesuits are not even mentioned in this section of the manuscript. Instead it says that in about 1700 the family came into contact with a body of itinerant Parava traders. They were attracted to the Paravas' patron saint Francis Xavier and 'submitted' to the saint as a divinely empowered spiritual master. Once he had been recognised as their tutelary patron, the family had a cult image made and the figure was then housed in its own small shrine.<sup>5</sup> Small-scale shrines like this were founded all over the southern Tamil hinterland during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Some were built up around a St Francis image, some around figures of the Virgin or one of the other saints of the Christian pantheon. The claims associated with the founding of the Velankanni shrine have already been mentioned. As the region's Franciscan missionaries maintained, this was probably a site which was built up by a circle of autonomous devotees, and their miraculous Virgin is still revered as a supernatural healer and boon-giver. As early as 1644, a touring Jesuit found a shrine with an image of St James and Greater

<sup>2</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 21-37, MMA.

<sup>3</sup> M. Arpudam, SJ 'A Genealogical Study of the Catholic Vellala Families at Vadakan-kulam' (MS vol. 1915) MMA. (Hereafter Arpudam, 'Genealogy'.) This volume contains over 100 annotated genealogies and family histories; many were first transcribed in the mid to late nineteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> 'A Short Account of the Mission under the Charge of the Fathers of the Society of Jesus of the Malabar Province in the East Indies. Written to the Most Revd. Fathers of the Society [1644]', in *Extracts of Letters from the Ancient Province of Malabar of the Society of Jesus*. See also A.S. Durairaj, P. Kaithanal, S. Jeyabalan, *Directory of the Diocese of Palaiyamkottai* (Palaiyamkottai, 1973), pp. 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> From a Tamil family history dated 1864, cited in Arpudam, 'Genealogy', p. 26.

(known locally as Lord Yagappan) in the village of Kayatar, at this time an important market centre containing a mixed population of Tamil Hindus (or people who would now be termed Hindus) and a sizeable community of Labbai Muslim weavers. Here too a small group of devotees is said to have collected on their own initiative around this newly transmitted cult tradition. Like St Francis Xavier, Yagappan/St James was an established Parava tutelary; there are Padroado-built St James churches at Manapad and several other coastal centres.<sup>6</sup>

The St James tradition was another cult which spread very widely into the Tamil hinterland, under the impetus of individual devotees rather than formal missionary proselytising. For example, David Mosse's study of south Indian Christianity discusses one of the most powerful of these autonomous seventeenth-century cult centres, the shrine of Lord Yagappan at Suranam, in the heart of the Marava-dominated poligar country of eastern Ramnad.<sup>7</sup> As at Kayatar, many of these autonomous Christian cult shrines were founded in localities which contained sizeable Muslim populations.<sup>8</sup> It must be remembered that the religious landscape of south India was in a state of great flux in this period. New cults and sectarian movements were taking shape all the time, and devotees were continually founding shrines to new Muslim cult saints. In areas where Muslims and their dargahs were already flourishing, this familiarity with the cults of Muslim saints and hero figures may have made it all the easier for local people to feel the attraction of a newly installed tutelary from the Christian pantheon. It has already been shown that Francis Xavier was revered as a fierce healer and disease-bringer who had much in common with the pirs and warrior pattavan figures of south India. Mosse shows that the cult of Lord Yagappan came to emphasise many of the same elements. In Ramnad he was (and still is) depicted as a hero on a white horse, meting out destruction to the demonic enemy. He is associated with disease and affliction, and he is also a figure of the wilderness like Kat Bava and the region's other forest pirs. According to local tradition his devotees first built a church for his miraculous statue in a remote coastal locality called Verkatu (from Tamil *kāṭu*: forest).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Durairaj *et al.*, *Directory*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', pp. 57–9, 454–62.

<sup>8</sup> On Muslims in Kayatar see Turnbull, 'Memoir', p. 138.

<sup>9</sup> The founding of the Suranam shrine is attributed to yet another itinerant family, untouchable Pallar agriculturalists in this case, who are said to have experienced a miraculous cure beneath a banyan tree in the saint's forest: a cutting from the tree becomes the centre of the shrine. In conventional Christian hagiography St James is a mounted warrior who saves Christian Spain from the Moors; in Tamilnad the 'Moors' are a generalised demonic enemy whom he tramples beneath the hoofs of his steed. Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', pp. 57–9, 454–62.

Once a saint like St Francis Xavier or St James was enshrined in a given locality his cult was taken up in very much the same way as a new pir or pattavan cult. Shrines were founded; legends of power and sanctity were disseminated, and the new adherents of the cult adopted a distinctive set of observances and ritual conventions. Naturally there were differences in the content of these cult traditions. Devotees adopted a style of veneration which was accepted as being proper and pleasing to the individual cult personage. Within the domain of the pir there were offerings of flower petals, sweets and, most importantly, sandalwood paste; green flags – often inscribed in Arabic – marked out the shrine's boundaries, and Arabic or Tamil–Arabic was used in the shrine's devotional rites; anthropomorphic images were forbidden. In contrast the new devotees of St Francis or St James would learn that the saint was to be approached through conventionalised cult statues like those found in established coastal churches. There were Latin invocations to be learned or at least recognised, and there was the specific body of cult myth and legend to be gleaned from the saint's established devotees. These were itinerant Paravas for the most part, but also some St Thomas Christians: eventually the small groups of new hinterland devotees would begin to disseminate the new tradition for themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly these traditions did not spread along channels created by foreign missionaries or the colonial state: in the case of Kayatar and Kamanayakanpatti the new cult centres were established along the Paravas' inland peddling and trade routes. As a result few of these early devotees underwent any sort of formal 'conversion' to Christianity, and most of the devotees who were drawn to the new Christian saint cults were entirely independent of European missionaries. Although they rarely acknowledged the importance of these early cult centres, when the missionary organisations began to sponsor campaigns of 'mass conversion' in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they were certainly not operating in an untouched 'pagan' society. Christian symbols and cult saints had already become a well-established part of the region's religious culture by this time. Indeed it is unlikely that southern

<sup>10</sup> Many Malabar Syrians traversed the Tamil country during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the Padroado succeeded in building up the Mylapore St Thomas shrine. There were also Syrian traders based in some southern Tamil court centres and trading towns: their shrines and churches helped to spread Christian ideas and symbols in Tamilnad. (See Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier*, II, p. 330; Claudius Buchanan, *Colonial Ecclesiastical Establishment* (London, 1813), p. 95.) The search for new resources by the region's contending nayaka and poligar domains stimulated growth in the trans-Ghat trade between Malabar and the southeast. This increased contacts between Keralan and Tamil trading and carrying groups and suggests another way in which Christian practices and cult traditions reached the Tamil hinterland.

Tamilnad would ever have become such a successful 'mission field' in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had it not been for this earlier period of independent Christian cult worship. Christianity here was a variant of broader patterns of Tamil worship, self-conscious of separateness but wholly assimilated into the world of the pir, the pattavan and the indigenous power divinity.

Among the chief features of this tradition were the many charismatic cult leaders, Christian gurus in effect, who provided a focus for the shrines' early devotees and who often came to be revered as divinely endowed heroes or cult saints in their own right. Most of these figures were Tamils who had absorbed some form of Christian teaching, sometimes from foreign missionaries, but often from entirely local sources. Most of them went on to built up personal followings in the various hinterland localities which served as centres for the region's autonomous Christian cult groups. In some cases (as the next section will show) these key individuals were actually European missionaries. In the seventeenth century many Roman Catholic missionaries were only very loosely connected to a centralised church or missionary organisation. Rather like the early Parava followers of St Francis Xavier, the disciples or adherents of such a missionary tended to perceive him as a holy man, as a figure imbued with an individualised spiritual power, and not as a representative of an over-arching ecclesiastical system.

The most typical of these Christian cult leaders, however, were Tamil devotees who operated very much in the tradition of the Hindu guru or divinely empowered spiritual master who had played such an important role in the development of the south Indian bhakti tradition. Amongst the many itinerant pilgrims, ascetics and self-professed 'seekers' who were perpetually traversing the Tamil country, there were many who had achieved their own individualistic interweaving of Hindu, Christian and even Muslim affiliation and observance. Such people tended to have little or no interest in formal sectarian and communal divisions. One such itinerant was a mendicant described by a Madurai-based Jesuit in 1700. The man wore the sort of iron neck frame used as a mark of penance by many Hindu *sanyasis* (ascetics). He had clearly been in contact with one of the many Tamil Christian saint-cult shrines, or even perhaps with a European missionary; he identified himself as a Christian in the sense that the devotee of a Tamil pir cult shrine might profess himself to have become a 'Muslim', and he was engaged in a spiritual quest like that of any Hindu sanyasi or Sufi pilgrim.<sup>11</sup> There is also a

<sup>11</sup> Jesuit letter of 1700, in J.S. Chandler, *History of the Jesuit Mission in Madura, South India in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Madras, 1909) pp. 45-6.

Jesuit report of 1710 which describes a wandering Paraiyan (untouchable) holy man who had been instructed and baptised by Padroado missionaries from the 'fishery coast'. Following his baptism this ascetic travelled to Madurai, donned the garb of a Muslim faqir and began to dispense what the missionary called 'un mélange monstrueux d'idolatrie, de christianisme et de mahometisme' ('a monstrous mixture of idolatry, Christianity and Islam'). Five years later the same holy man was touring some of the more southerly Christian cult centres, including the localities of Vadakkankulam and Kurukalpatti.<sup>12</sup>

Such people did not necessarily go on to attract communities of devotee-disciples, but as this last example shows, there had always been a few exceptional individuals from inland areas of Tamilnad who were formally instructed and baptised by European missionaries, either in centres such as Madurai, which was the earliest of the Jesuits' hinterland bases, or in the course of the missionaries' tours into the interior. These are the sorts of people who came to be revered as founders of the region's oldest inland Christian settlements, and many accounts of the coming of Christianity to the interior are constructed around figures of just this type.

In 1905 a collection of 500 Tamil palmleaf manuscripts (*ōlais*) was discovered in an eighteenth-century chapel at Sendamaram in north-western Tirunelveli. Most of these texts are thought to date from the late seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, and one of the oldest of them gives an account of the history of Christian devotional activity in the village of Tadampatti near Sendamaram.<sup>13</sup> According to this text Tadampatti was the centre of yet another early informal cult network. Its devotees were mostly Paraiyans, and their focus was a shrine to St Peter which is said to date from the first quarter of the seventeenth century.

The cult is supposed to have begun with the arrival of a Tamil Christian convert who is described as a 'Pillaimar', a title implying identification with the superior Tamil sat-sudra Vellala caste group. Men recognised as members of this heterogeneous and loosely structured caste category often served as non-Brahman temple functionaries. This particular 'Pillaimar' is said to have belonged to a family of superior ritualists attached to the Sri Minaksi Sundaresvarar temple at Madurai. The text says that he was baptised with his brother by one of the Jesuit missionaries based in Madurai, and that the two brothers then travelled south into the Marava country 'to escape the persecution of their father

<sup>12</sup> J. Bertrand, *La Mission du Maduré d'après de documents inédits* (4 vols. Paris 1854), IV, pp. 344-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Olais* transcribed by Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 56-78.

and other Hindu relations'. Both of them are said to have built up circles of devotee-disciples and to have been revered as divinely empowered gurus or spiritual preceptors. In common with the region's other Christian guru figures they are remembered as founders of their localities' first churches. They derived much additional authority from these acts of religious patronage, and their churches came to be revered as shrines, as local repositories of power associated with the individual charismatic founder-figure rather than an overarching ecclesiastical network.<sup>14</sup>

Neither brother appears in these texts then as an agent or subordinate representative of a European mission. Instead they are portrayed as independent holy men possessing divinely bestowed charismatic powers like those of the region's Muslim pirs. The brother who settled in Tadampatti was held to have the power of miraculous healing. Even a recently-compiled local history produced by the region's Catholic ecclesiastical authorities describes an incident which could easily have come straight out of a Tamil tazkira (Sufi biography): the Tadampatti Christian guru is said to have cured a local poligar ruler of an ulcerous skin disease.<sup>15</sup> This healer's brother founded a shrine to the Virgin at the locality which came to be known as Kurukalpatti. There is a particularly strong local tradition associated with this cult leader. Unlike his brother who married into a local Vellala landholding lineage and whose kinship connections are known in great detail in the area, the Kurukalpatti brother is said to have remained a celibate throughout his life, and he seems to have been revered as a kind of Christian ascetic or *sadhu*. This would place him in the special category of holy men – Hindu, Muslim, and in this case Christian as well – whose powers were viewed as being enhanced by their feats of renunciation and physiological containment.<sup>16</sup>

The charismatic power of these figures seems to have attracted a sizeable population of new settlers to these localities. By the middle of the seventeenth century a significant number of settlers, including many Shanar toddy tappers and Maravas from the vicinity of Kulasekaramankalam, had settled in this new locality. The name Kurukalpatti – the place or village of the *kuru* (guru) – indicates that the Vellala convert had come to be accepted as a kind of autonomous Christian holy man or

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56–60. The account describes their original followers as Paraiyans. The brother who settled in Tadampatti is credited with the founding of the village's church of St Peter: he is depicted as having control of the shrine's sacred objects and regalia and is said to have taken these objects with him when he founded a second St Peter shrine nearby.

<sup>15</sup> Durairaj *et al.*, *Directory*, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 60.

sectarian leader, and that he was perceived as a guru both by his own followers and by others in the wider society.<sup>17</sup>

While it is true that these two brothers have always been identified as élite sat-sudra converts with ancestral connections to the Madurai Minaksi temple, most of the region's other early Christian gurus were people like the low-ranking Pallars who are credited with the founding of the St James cult centre at Suranam in Ramnad.<sup>18</sup> Conventional mission literature would stress the low-caste status of such religious teachers because Christianity is supposed to be the religion of the 'oppressed'. However, it is important to remember that in south India persons of low caste, besides being polluting, also have access to certain types of 'demonic' supernatural power. In some cases these 'untouchable' and low-caste leaders were already established holy men whose devotees followed after them when they took on a new identity as professing Christian gurus. One such figure was a widely venerated Valluvar sadhu or ascetic. (The Valluvars appear in colonial ethnographies as an 'untouchable' priestly sub-caste of the Paraiyans; they were often charm-makers and astrologers.) As many as 2,000 Paraiyans are said to followed this holy man into the new Christian devotional tradition after their master was baptised by the Italian Jesuit Robert de Nobili (1577–1656).<sup>19</sup>

In the locality of Punavannam it was a Paraiyan woman who took on the role of charismatic leader and shrine-builder for a circle of seventeenth-century devotees. This female guru-preceptor died in about 1670 and was succeeded by her son: this pattern of hereditary spiritual succession was typical of many Muslim and Hindu devotional networks. In attracting new followers these leaders operated initially through family and caste connections, and most accounts describe a nucleus of followers based on close kin and caste relationships. But with their mixed populations of Maravas, Shanars, sat-sudra 'Vadugas' and even untouchable Paraiyans, and with their willingness to offer reverence to low-caste Christian gurus, these groups transcended formal caste divisions and were therefore comparable to the region's caste-denying bhakti sects.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> This locality too had had contact with a European missionary during the early seventeenth century, probably a priest from Madurai who passed through the area offering Christian 'instruction' and baptism to local people.

<sup>18</sup> Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', pp. 57–9, 454–62.

<sup>19</sup> Neill, *Christianity in India*, I, p. 294. This ascetic was baptised in about 1626.

<sup>20</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 76.

### **Missionaries and cult-based Christianity in Tamilnad**

The few European missionaries who penetrated the Tamil hinterland in this period played a paradoxical role in the early Christian devotional movements. Although there was at least one Jesuit based in Madurai at the end of the sixteenth century, he and his successors were concerned with the town's small Portuguese and Eurasian populations, with its newly established Parava settlement, and with the few individual 'seekers' who had taken up the Christian *margam* (Tam. *mārkkam*) or 'way'. Although these were the people who tended to move off into the hinterland and found independent Christian cult centres, the Jesuits themselves took little notice of the early Christian gurus and saint shrines. As far as the wider society was concerned the Padroado was an alien institution which had chosen to tie itself to the region's low-caste maritime communities.

The early missionaries had been remarkably deft in their use of the region's caste institutions, but they did not attempt to acquire any systematic grasp of Hindu theology, still less to adjust their teachings to the religion of the wider society. Francis Xavier had used Portuguese words and phrases for the key items of the Christian lexicon; this next generation of Padroado missionaries was still making do with crudely Tamilised Portuguese and Latin terms in their dealings with current and potential converts. This meant that even sixty years after Xavier's death, no missionary had conceived of an accommodation between Christianity and the 'satanic heathenism' from which he aspired to deliver his hearers. Characteristically, the formula which the missionaries devised for any prospective converts whom they did encounter was 'do you wish to enter the *parangi kulam*?', i.e. do you wish to join the community or kin group of the foreigners. (Parangi is the Tamil version of 'firangi' – 'franks', aliens, westerners.)<sup>21</sup>

What was being said here was that the missionaries' Christianity (as opposed to that of the independent gurus) – 'orthodox' sacramental Christianity in which the convert was baptised, renamed and placed under the authority of a European missionary priest – was a form of community, a new corporate identity in which the convert would have to share ties of blood and bodily substance with the foreigners who had come to dispense the new Christian *margam*. This is not what the Paravas had done when they accepted Francis Xavier as their tutelary lord and spiritual preceptor, or when the hinterland devotee attached himself to one of the new Tamil Christian gurus. The sharing of substance with an

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Neill, *Christianity in India*, I, p. 280.

acknowledged guru or holy man was a form of submission which all south Indians might accept; the preceptor was beyond impurity, beyond defilement and the constraints of the dharmic order. To enter the kulam or communal order of *all* parangi was something quite different. Exceptional individuals like Francis Xavier might be accepted as charismatic gurus and tutelaries, but the parangi as a body were persons apart: in the eyes of a Brahman or Vellala, a person who would now be identified as a conventional 'clean' caste Hindu, the parangi were defiled by their eating of beef and by their other unclean practices. Unlike the St Thomas Christians and even the devotees of the autonomous hinterland saint cults, they and those who shared substance with them could have no standing within the existing moral order. Conversion as the missionaries understood it would be inconceivable to all but a tiny minority of exceptional 'seekers'.

It was the Padroado missionary Robert de Nobili who found a way beyond the limitations of '*parangi kulam*' Christianity. This celebrated Italian Jesuit's assault on the accepted values and techniques of the Padroado incensed his contemporaries, but he is now seen as a revolutionary innovator – the most important of the small group of pioneering Jesuits who settled in Asia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and created radical new techniques for the dissemination of Christianity. These scholar-priests were the first Europeans to undertake a systematic study of Asian languages, and they are now recognised as the founding fathers of European orientalism. What really set them apart from other missionaries, however, was the decision to steep themselves in the high culture and learning of India, China and Japan, and then to devise a new tradition of Christian worship using local forms and customs, and in particular the forms and customs of local élites. In Japan, where the Jesuits claimed 500,000 samurai or warrior-class converts by 1615, missionaries wore the saffron robes of Buddhist monks and became trusted councillors to the great *daimyo* barons of Kyushu. In China the Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) dressed in the gown of a Confucian scholar. He and his successors became high-ranking notables of the Peking court and drew their converts from the upper reaches of the imperial service gentry.<sup>22</sup>

De Nobili's version of this new approach was to isolate himself from the other Padroado missionaries and their converts and to claim a place for himself in the upper ranks of the local caste ranking scheme. If he

<sup>22</sup> The debate over the acceptability of De Nobili's techniques was known as the 'Malabar rites controversy'. The Jesuits in China were also accused of making undue accommodations to 'heathen' belief and practice. See *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, III, pp. 611–17; IX, pp. 97–9.

succeeded, neither he nor any converts he might win would be stigmatised as members of the degraded parangi kulam, and here too it would be possible to attract men of rank and power to Christianity. To the horror of his fellow missionaries, de Nobili made his home in a high-caste residential quarter of Madurai, exchanged his priestly garb for the robe of a Brahman sanyasi (renouncer) and adopted the sanyasi's rigorous lifestyle and dietary customs. When he presented himself to the city's Brahman pandits it was as an aristocratic Kshatriya from Rome who had come to Madurai as a seeker after knowledge and enlightenment. 'I am not a parangi', he declared. 'I was not born in the land of the parangis, nor was I ever connected with their race . . . I came from Rome, where my family hold the same rank as respectable rajas hold in this country.'<sup>23</sup>

After intensive study of the Tamil and Sanskrit sacred scriptures, de Nobili debated on equal terms with the city's Brahman pandits. He took the name Tattuvabodhakar, 'the teacher of reality', and composed a series of learned Tamil treatises and devotional poems. His aim in these works was to reach an accommodation between the Hindu and Christian scriptural traditions and it was this, together with the high-caste Hindu lifestyle which he followed with his converts, which so outraged his detractors. Despite the controversies which he provoked his work had a lasting impact on the idiom of Christian discourse in south India. His most notable achievement was the creation of a new Christian vocabulary for the region's converts in which all the key words and phrases were drawn from the existing terminology of 'high' scriptural Hinduism. Much of this was a consciously 'Sanskritic' vocabulary: key terms such as *veda*, *mantra* and *prasatam* were all given a central place in this new religious discourse. At the same time, though, the term *bhakti* (Tam. *batti*) with its strong connotations of ecstatic Hindu theism was taken over and applied to the concept of Christian devotion. This reflects the strong influence of the south Indian Hindu *bhakti* tradition which can be observed in many of his works.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Neill, *Christianity in India*, I, p. 288. See S. Rajamanickam, *The First Oriental Scholar* (Tirunelveli, 1972). Foreign priests may be easier to incorporate into the Hindu moral order than new 'convert' families. As a celibate the priest can be equated with a Hindu renouncer. He has withdrawn from many contaminating social exchanges; he does not mix his bodily substance with other people's, and if his personal habits do not introduce unclean elements into the community his presence does not raise questions of propriety or moral classification.

<sup>24</sup> Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor. Or Mogul India 1653-1708*. Trans. W. Irvine (4 vols., London, 1907-8), III, p. 236; Bror Tiliander, *Christian and Hindu Terminology: A Study of their Mutual Relations with Special Reference to the Tamil Area* (Uppsala, 1974), pp. 27-9, 57, 107, 183, 216-24, 283, 286; K. Meenakshisundaram, *The Contribution of European Scholars to Tamil* (Madras, 1974), pp. 278-80, 317-18.

De Nobili's innovations had far-reaching consequences. His successors, most notably the Jesuit scholar-priest C.J. Beschi (1680–1764) carried on the work of building up a vernacular Christian literary tradition in south India.<sup>25</sup> Some of de Nobili's Tamil literary compositions are still widely known in the region and much of the Hindu terminology which he employed is still current among Tamil-speaking Christians. In a sense then his activities provide a scriptural or literary context for the interweaving of Hindu and Christian traditions which was already underway in the society at large. But it is hard to know whether de Nobili's systematic bridging of the theological gap had any direct effect on this process of informal spontaneous cult formation. It is certainly striking that the bhakti tradition left such a strong imprint on the Jesuits' compositions. Since the region's bhakti sects provided a model for most of the early 'syncretic' Christian cult groups, de Nobili's more formal literary treatments of south Indian devotional themes may have been known to some of these Christian or semi-Christian devotees.

On the other hand de Nobili's works do not attempt to engage with the south Indian Muslim tradition. Therefore, even at the level of formal or textual beliefs, they reflect only one strand amongst the region's web of overlapping religious traditions. Furthermore de Nobili's converts were all men of high caste. They all wore the sacred thread and received the sacraments from their own special missionaries, a select group of priests under de Nobili who used the title 'sanyasi' and maintained the same pure Brahmanical lifestyle as their leader.<sup>26</sup> In this way the mission's tiny group of élite converts could be protected from any threat to their ritual standing. Clearly then there was a limit to the degree of direct contact which would have occurred in this period: de Nobili's own converts had little chance to transmit their master's teachings to the autonomous cult groups in Tamilnad.<sup>27</sup>

There were signs too that the Jesuits' patronage of élite Christian clients was arousing unrest amongst lower-ranking convert groups, in this case the population of Parava migrants who had settled in Madurai. De Nobili's focus on Brahmanical criteria of rank and precedence, and his emphasis on the ritual purity of the sanyasi missionaries and their

<sup>25</sup> Meenakshisundaram, *The Contribution*, pp. 281–3, 318–35; A. Muttusami Pillei, 'A brief sketch of the life and writings of Father C.J. Beschi or Viramamuni' *MJLS* 11:27 (1840), pp. 250–300; Tiliander, *Christian and Hindu Terminology*, pp. 30–1.

<sup>26</sup> Fr. Peter Martin to Fr. De Villette [1700?], *Travels of the Jesuits into Various Parts of the World*, I, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Rajamanickam, *The First Oriental Scholar*. De Nobili had fifty of these high-caste followers by 1609. The mission claimed 600 'higher caste converts' in 1643. Neill, *Christianity in India*, I, p. 287; 1644 'Short Account'.

high-caste converts was one of the early signs of a move towards hierarchy and stratification amongst many south Indian 'non-Brahman' groups during the pre-colonial period. This affected professing Christians as well as non-Christians. Thus as early as 1610 some of the Madurai Paravas were trying to fight the claims of elevated caste rank which were being made for the new converts. These Paravas taunted the Jesuits' high-caste converts with the claim that they had no right to be viewed as a separate and ritually superior caste group because they had been polluted by the touch of the missionaries' saliva on the communion vessels. It was to counter this claim that de Nobili wrote his 'manifesto' of 1610 claiming Kshatriya status: his touch (and that of his sanyasi missionaries) could not be considered polluting since, as he declared, none of them were impure parangis. This clash foreshadowed the rivalries between low-ranking Christian Shanars and Vellala or 'Pillaimar' converts which will be described in chapter 11.<sup>28</sup>

### **Missionaries and poligars**

The paradox of this early missionary initiative is that de Nobili himself became another of the legendary hero personages of south India. Within his small circle of converts he too functioned as a kind of spiritual master, even as a presiding guru addressed as Aiyar or 'lord' in the tradition of the Hindu bhakti sects. De Nobili's converts produced their own account of this relationship:

We call ourselves 'pupils of the *Aiyar*' [de Nobili] because in these parts it is customary for pupils of a Guru so to style themselves... The inhabitants of Mathurai regard the *Aiyar* as a man of extraordinary erudition and impeccable conduct. He is there very highly esteemed. The spiritual law [*gnanavedam*] in which the Aiyar has instructed us, is here regarded as admirable.<sup>29</sup>

From this basis de Nobili soon came to be perceived as part of the region's informal cult tradition. He too was credited with miraculous powers, and his reputation for learning and sanctity made him a figure of widespread popular veneration in Tamilnad. In the 1620s he served as the equivalent of a court guru to some of the powerful ruling warrior lineages of the Salem region.<sup>30</sup> During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries his

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Jesuit Provincial 8 Dec. 1610, quoted in Neill, *Christianity in India*, I, p. 287. This dispute shows that the Paravas shared many 'Hindu' views about ritual purity and pollution, and the defilement involved in contact with human secretions and waste-products.

<sup>29</sup> Neill, *Christianity in India*, I, p. 414.

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. S. Rajamanickam, 'De Nobili in the Madurai jail: a letter of Sebastian De Maya', *ICHR* 18:2 (1984), p. 92.

status as a cult hero was further enhanced when the Jesuits began to produce Tamil biographical texts which dramatised his work and achievements for a wide popular audience. De Nobili is therefore still known and revered in the region, particularly in the area around Madurai.

From this early period of missionary activity, then, European priests were readily absorbed into the region's local pantheons of power divinities and martial hero figures. Outstanding personalities like de Nobili were accepted as a new but recognisable type of spiritual master or guru. Like other gurus they were equipped with their own brand of esoteric teaching, in this case the *vedapustakam*, the Gospel or Christian 'veda-book'. This secret knowledge was said to endow the priest with access to supernatural powers, and specifically to violent and demonic powers and energies. Thus in a number of local legends these early hinterland missionaries actually summon up demonic beings to engage in cosmic warfare for them. According to a tradition which is still current in Madurai, the city's Jesuits once tried to overcome the power of the Hindu god Siva by conjuring up a demon asura in the shape of a cow. The cow died of love when confronted by Siva's champion, the divine bull Nandi; the smitten cow was then turned into a hillock, the Pasumalai which stands two miles south of Madurai.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore it was not only the local Hindus who associated the missionaries with demonic power. The early Jesuits had a literal belief in demonic possession. One such missionary reported that he administered the sacrament of baptism as a specific for the driving out of demon snakes and other malignant spirits. As was so often the case, the two apparently distinct religious traditions tended to overlap and reinforce one another.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the European 'sanyasis' who directed their message to Brahmans, superior sat-sudra Vellala groups and other practitioners of a clean vegetarian lifestyle, de Nobili's scheme had involved the creation of a second body of missionaries, the *paṇṭāraswāmi* fathers (from (*paṇṭāram*, non-Brahman renouncer) who were organised to deal with the so-called 'sudras', meaning lower-ranking meat-eaters and other groups who were defined as ritually inferior within the Brahmanical scale of caste rank and

<sup>31</sup> Baliga, *Madura*, p. 403. The Jesuit's cow demon becomes a kind of failed temptress like the would-be seducer of the Khwajamalai pir; both legends focus on the theme of containing unclean lusts and passions.

<sup>32</sup> Letter of Fr Calmette S.J., 17 Sept. 1735, quoted in J. Bertrand, *La Mission du Maduré*, I, p. 310. Fr Caussanel the fiercely authoritarian author of the 'Historical notes' MS, was another south Indian missionary who became a figure of cult veneration and reputed miraculous power. Leopold Bazou, *Stranger than Fiction. 100 Years of the Jesuit Madura Mission*. Souvenir of the Centenary of the Jesuit Madura Mission (Trichinopoly, 1938), pp. 28–9.

precedence. Here too the influence of de Nobili produced a much more dynamic approach to missionary operations, and by the 1630s members of this group were setting out on preaching tours which reached deep into the hinterland poligar domains. One enterprising Jesuit made a perilous trip through the interior of southern Tirunelveli in 1638. Others moved north along the Kauveri and into the Kallar and Udaiyar poligar country. As of 1644 the Jesuit sanyasi missionaries claimed to have baptised 350 Brahman converts in Trichy. The pantaraswami fathers had been active in this key nayaka stronghold since the 1630s, and these Jesuits also managed to baptise a few hundred converts in the poligar fort-mart towns of Erode, Satyamankalam and Udaiyarpalaiyam.<sup>33</sup> There were also forays into the southern Marava and 'Vaduga' poligar country: even larger scale mass baptisms were carried out here in the 1630s and 1640s. Karur and Kayatar were among the most important centres of this region's early mission activity.<sup>34</sup>

It is likely that these ceremonies of baptism involved people who had already been in contact with touring Christian gurus or autonomous cult shrines. In many cases the missionaries' mass 'conversion' rites may have been the only occasion on which the new adherents actually came into contact with the European church hierarchy; once they had undergone such a rite the 'converts' would tend to carry on as devotees of the independent gurus and their cult shrines. In their permanent mission bases the Jesuits devised elaborate *ter* [sacred chariot] processions like those staged by the Paravas. Here the intention was to minimize divisions between converts and 'heathens'. Describing one such festival the Jesuit Fr Martin reports,

The chief Personage of the Settlement, his whole Family and the rest of the Heathens who assisted in the [ter] Procession, fell prostrate thrice before the Image of Our Saviour risen from the Dead; and worshipped him in such a manner, as, very happily, blended them in indiscriminately with the most fervent Christians.<sup>35</sup>

Between 1640 and 1690 the Jesuits claimed that they had made as many as 8,000 converts in the area which they knew as the 'Marava country'. Many of these new affiliates were Paraiyans and other dependent labouring people, but a large proportion came from the region's Marava warrior population.<sup>36</sup> The numbers involved were considerably smaller

<sup>33</sup> 1644 'Short Account'; Manucci, *Storia*, III, p. 236.

<sup>34</sup> As of 1644, the Jesuit pantaraswami missionaries reported 2,500 baptisms in this area. Manucci, *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Fr Martin [1700?], *Travels of the Jesuits*, II, pp. 288–9.

<sup>36</sup> Letter, Fr Martin, in *ibid.*, I, pp. 452–3; W. Strickland and T.W.M. Marshall, *Catholic Missions in Southern India to 1865* (London, 1865), p. 42.

than those affiliated to the Muslim cult shrines of the Tamil poligar country. Nevertheless these Christian cult traditions had a great appeal for the region's warrior-pastoralist groups. In part this stemmed from the fact that south India now contained at least two well-known warrior groups who had combined Christianity with the values and customs of a martial lifestyle. The Syrian Christians provided one such model, and the second was the population of 'topasses', mostly Catholics of mixed Tamil and Portuguese ancestry who were concentrated in the old Portuguese trading centres along the Coromandel coast. These Eurasian Christians are rarely thought of as a group with a distinctive identity or status in south Indian society: it is usually assumed that they were a 'degenerate' and marginalised appendage of the European powers. In fact, though, the Tamilnad topasses constituted a remarkably large part of the region's military population during the pre-colonial and early colonial periods. They too had a reputation for martial prowess, and like the Syrians, they were widely recruited into the new armies of the south Indian regional powers.<sup>37</sup>

To the Maravas, both the Syrians and the topasses would have been well known as groups who had come to follow the Christian margam, and also as people who had acquired wealth and standing as military client populations at a time when many Marava clans were undergoing a similar transformation. Therefore as the Maravas became more 'caste-like' in the service of their new patrons and overlords, and as they began to look for new and more prestigious caste lifestyles, they may well have seen the Christian warrior groups as a model or reference group. The closest parallel here would be the 'Rowthers' and other Tamilnad Muslims whose shrines provided a focus for other clan-based martial populations.

Even more important in this process of 'indigenising' Christianity was the patronage provided by many south Indian rulers, particularly by the poligars of southern Tamilnad who perceived Christian shrines, symbols and personalities as repositories of power, especially power in battle. Since at least some south Indian missionaries had come to be associated with supernatural and demonic powers, Christian shrines and churches could be readily assimilated into the local religious landscape. Many south Indian rulers came to perceive mission outposts and churches as important political resources. David Mosse has found that by the 1690s the Setupatis of Ramnad had established themselves as patrons of the miracle-working banyan tree shrine of St James at Suranam.<sup>38</sup> There

<sup>37</sup> NMDLT, *History of Ayder Ali*, p. 136; Anantakrishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, pp. 275–7.

<sup>38</sup> Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', p. 57.

were many other areas in which hinterland Christian shrines were invested with the same strategic value as the region's Hindu and Muslim cult foundations. Some poligars invoked the figure of Christ or the saints in the same way that the region's Muslim warrior rulers deployed tutelary pirs in time of war. It was reported in 1660 that a Kallar chief whose domain was located near Tanjore was seen to 'kneel and call upon the name of Jesus' before riding into battle against the army of the Adil Shahi sultan of Bijapur.<sup>39</sup> In the 1680s a Kallar chief who belonged to the same lineage as the Tondaiman chiefs of Pudukkottai was reported to have 'developed a marked respect for the Christian religion, its teaching, its ceremonies and symbols and especially for the symbol of the Cross'. The Jesuits established one of their key early outposts in the Kallar domains in 1686: this was at Avur, where a line of Kallar chiefs known as the Kattalur and Perambur rajas gave their support to the missionaries' activities.<sup>40</sup>

Many of the best known early Christian guru figures received similar patronage and protection from other warrior chiefs in the region, and as at Avur, these endorsements played a crucial role in the construction of the hinterland's original Christian cult networks. In the far south (present day Tirunelveli) the Marava rulers of Sokampatti and Talaivankottai were among the most active of these early patrons. The Sendamaram collection of seventeenth and eighteenth century palmleaf olai records asserts that the Christian cult centres at Sendamankalam, Punavannam and Kurukalpatti were all built up through the patronage of these two poligar chiefs.<sup>41</sup> Several of the region's oldest surviving missionary churches contain inscriptions recording pledges of protection from the local rulers. The church at Kamanayakanpatti in the Ettaiyapuram palaiyam contains an inscription dated 1690 in which the raja proclaims eternal protection and support for the locality's Christians.<sup>42</sup>

At one level these links can be viewed in purely strategic terms. Some poligars including the Kallar chiefs of Pudukkottai began to create ties of allegiance and affiliation with the Christian cult groups at precisely the point when the nayaka rulers of Tanjore and Madurai were sending large scale military expeditions into the southern poligar country. This then was part of a wider strategy by which individual poligars sought to balance their claims of power and sovereignty against the demands of

<sup>39</sup> Jesuit letter of 1660, quoted in Chandler, *History of the Jesuit Mission*, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Venkatarama Ayyar, *Manual of Pudukkottai*, I, pp. 97–8; II, Pt 2, p. 1020; letter Fr Martin, 11 Dec. 1700, *Travels of the Jesuits*, I, pp. 452–75.

<sup>41</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 94–7; Durairaj *et al.*, *Palaiyamkottai Directory*, p. 62.

<sup>42</sup> Observed at Kamanayakanpatti, Aug. 1977. See Caldwell, *History of Tirnevelly*, p. 236; Sathyanatha Aiyar and Krishnaswami Aiyangar, *Nayaks of Madura*, p. 269; Muttusami Pillei, 'Fr Beschi', pp. 268–9.

overlordship being asserted by the nayakas. In this sense the Christians and their shrines were no different from any other object of the ruler's pious benefactions. In supporting a Christian shrine the ruler was simply making another assertion of dominion; he was incorporating a new locus of power into his existing networks and could therefore show that he was lord of an active and expanding sacred landscape.<sup>43</sup>

As a result these poligars whom we now think of as Hindu warrior rulers actually helped to create the context for Christian devotional activity in the Tamil hinterland. By taking up these small groups of autonomous devotees and converts the poligars gave them an established place in the region's indigenous religious tradition. This made it possible for many isolated cult groups to be absorbed into the broader networks of faith and devotion which existed in the states and chiefdoms of the south. These cross-cutting cult traditions were themselves defined by the ruler's endorsement and patronage. Thus even when the missionaries began to impose a formal structure onto the loosely organised cult centres they never really detached them from the wider sacred landscape to which they had always belonged. Few missionaries ever acknowledged this debt, but even so, this early phase of state patronage paved the way for the great spread of formal European mission-based Christianity in the region during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It should be recognised then that it was the poligars and not just the European pioneers like de Nobili who helped to make Christianity part of an intelligible and truly indigenous pattern of faith and worship in south India. Through their acts of patronage, Christianity was transformed into something that was no longer alien and unassimilable – no longer just the faith of the 'parangi kulam'.

### **Mass conversions in the poligar country**

During the 1680s, the Jesuits of the Madurai Mission recorded a dramatic rise in the number of Christian converts to be found in the southern Tamil hinterland. Whether or not they had originally been in contact with an independent Christian guru or saint cult shrine, these people were all supposed to have made a formal profession of faith and affiliation to the European church authorities. Although once again many of these new adherents were members of low-ranking agricultural groups, the Jesuit

<sup>43</sup> In the 1680s when the Pudukkottai Kallars were most active in supporting Christian missions and cult centres, the ruling line was beginning to throw off tributary ties to the nayaka rulers of Tanjore and Trichy. Venkatarama Ayyar, *Manual of Pudukkottai*, II, Pt 1, pp. 758–9.

letters claim that up to two or three thousand came from the Marava and Agamudaiyan warrior pastoralist groups to which many of the region's poligar chiefs belonged. Most of these new recruits were from the Marava chiefdoms of the Ramnad region, and virtually all of them are thought to have been drawn to the new faith through the activities of another celebrated Jesuit, the 'pantaraswami' missionary John de Britto (1647–93; canonised 1947).<sup>44</sup>

Like Francis Xavier, de Britto presided over dramatic mass baptism ceremonies, but these self-professed converts included men of rank and power in the Marava chiefdoms. There were conversions within the household of the Setupati ruler of Ramnad; the commander of the Ramnad army became a Christian, and in 1692 the Setupati's kinsman Tadaiya Tevar, poligar of the Siruvalli domain, also declared himself a convert. A number of lesser Marava poligars took up formal Christian affiliation at this time: these included the rulers of the Sarukani, Oriyur and Pagani chiefdoms.<sup>45</sup> On a smaller scale this would seem to be much like the course of events in sixteenth-century Japan when Jesuit influence was at its height. First there were conversions amongst the warrior élite – the Christian daimyo in Japan and the poligar lineages in Tamilnad – and then came more generalised adhesions across the martial population at large.

This was what the Jesuits expected: it was assumed that once the missionaries had converted the leading men of the poligar chiefdoms, their retainers and dependents would be drawn in as well. But what does 'conversion' mean in such a setting? It is true that the Jesuits had now devised much more effective techniques than those of their early predecessors. But it should not be assumed that the Jesuits were the dominant partners in these new relationships, or that the newly baptised Maravas and Agamudiyans had been made over into passive recipients of a 'pure' and standardised version of the Christian doctrine. More than anywhere else it was here in the poligar country with its blood-spilling power divinities and its ever-shifting political landscape that individual missionaries were themselves made over and, in a sense, 'converted' so as to fit in with prevailing local perceptions of divine power and kingship.

<sup>44</sup> Kadhivel, *History of the Maravas*, p. 39; Strickland and Marshall, *Catholic Missions*, pp. 44–6; F. Faber, *The Lives of Fr. Paul Segneri . . . and the Ven. John de Britto, S.J.* (London, 1851).

<sup>45</sup> Kadhivel *History of the Maravas*, pp. 9, 40–2; Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', p. 39. Through the use of the title Setupati the Ramnad rulers declared themselves guardians of the *sētu*, the sacred Ramesvaram causeway, with the right to command the route which led to Ramesvaram's pilgrimage places. See Price, 'Resources and rule', p. 6.

Such individuals could then be inserted into the local pantheon as fierce figures of power with direct access to the supernatural and, most importantly, with the capacity to transform and reconstitute the political order.

South India has produced many such cult traditions involving European clerics, but one of the most important of these developments was the emergence of the Jesuit John de Britto as a deified hero tutelary. This missionary saint-martyr is still the focus of an active devotional cult in the Marava country. Its chief shrine is located in the former poligar centre of Oriyur in Ramnad district, which is where de Britto was executed by order of the Ramnad Setupati in 1693.<sup>46</sup> De Britto was perceived very differently from his predecessor de Nobili. Both were revered as supernaturally endowed guru figures whose power was personal and charismatic rather than a product of their institutional connections. De Nobili, though, was known to have been a remote and idealised renouncer who confined his contacts to a small circle of high-caste Christian followers and who never built up an open-ended and expansive circle of convert-devotees. De Britto the pantaraswami priest was much more readily portrayed as a dynamic hero figure. Like Khan the Muslim hero and patron of the Madurai Kallars, de Britto transacted with men of power, in this case with the chiefs and warriors of the meat-eating Marava. He too could be identified with their heroic lifestyle and thus with the world of 'demonic' heroes and power divinities.

This transformation took place with at least the tacit co-operation of the Jesuits. Here too, as in their support for the St Thomas cult and the Paravas' tutelary cult traditions, the missionaries knew how valuable it would be to foster a tradition of shared devotion and cult myth for their new affiliates. With their greatly improved vernacular language skills the Jesuits were able to set about this task in a much more sophisticated manner than in the days when they had first set out to popularise the Mylapore cult site. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the Jesuits were circulating a rich array of biographical and devotional lore in which Christian hagiographical themes were recast in forms which derived from Tamil ballads, epics and popular cult legends. Not surprisingly missionaries like de Britto came to feature in these tales of miracles, instantaneous conversions and titanic clashes with 'heathen' priests and rulers.<sup>47</sup> The

<sup>46</sup> Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', pp. 429–33; Ramaswami, *Tamil Nadu District Gazetteers. Ramanathapuram*, p. 927. The seventeenth-century traveller Manucci notes that the de Britto shrine is located along the main pilgrim route to Ramesvaram. *Storia*, III, p. 236.

<sup>47</sup> Caussanel's 'Historical notes', (e.g. pp. 125–6). Faber's account of de Britto in *The Lives* is based on an earlier Jesuit biography (pub. Paris, 1746). And see Muttusami Pillei, 'Fr Beschi', pp. 254, 269.

result was that consciously or not, the Jesuits lent their authority to the remoulding of these personalities as a class of indigenous Tamil power divinities. In these 'official' versions of the de Britto story, the martyr priest is identified as a miraculous healer. The conversion of the Marava raja of Siruvalli appears in these accounts as yet another stock episode from the south Indian tradition of divine curing and disease-bringing. The poligar is afflicted with an agonising ailment, he submits himself to the saint's power, and the moment he hears the saint's voice reading out a passage from the Gospel he is instantaneously cured.<sup>48</sup>

The grisly stories of de Britto's execution identify the missionary even more explicitly as a power divinity and deified domain-builder within the land of the Marava poligars. The essential background to this drama was the battle for dominion which was taking place within one of the most fiercely contested regions of the poligar country. The key figure in these events was the Marava ruler Vijaya Raghunatha Kilavan (d. 1710) who had been struggling to mass additional resources and manpower for the newly constituted Ramnad domain since his seizure of power in 1674.<sup>49</sup> Since domain-building was by definition an exercise in expansion, the Setupati's campaigns led to fierce confrontations with the region's other Marava clan chiefs, particularly with those from the nearby domains of Mangalkutti and Siruvalli.

These were the two chiefdoms in which the Marava country's main Christian conversion movement was centred at the end of the seventeenth century, and the Marava raja of Siruvalli was the Setupati's strongest rival in these conflicts amongst the region's warrior chiefs. The only way to fight off the Ramnad ruler's attempts to expand his domain was to build these lesser realms into equally active and expansive warrior chiefdoms. It was at this point that Christianity became a critical asset in these confrontations. The Siruvalli ruler's conversion was conceived and understood as an act of statecraft, and when his kinsmen and retainers joined their ruling lord as declared followers of the new Christian margam, the result was a firming up of martial clan solidarities, and thus a strategic tightening of the ruler's open-ended alliance system. As was seen earlier, Christianity had been accepted as an attractive corporate cult tradition for at least some south Indian warrior groups. Thus by declaring themselves to be Christians, these Marava warriors

<sup>48</sup> Jesuit report of 1692, quoted in Kadhivel, *History of the Maravas*, p. 42, note 41.

<sup>49</sup> This was a classic exercise in dominion-building. Vijaya Raghunatha Kilavvan created an army of perhaps 40,000 men and turned the fort-mart town of Ramnad into a 'kingly' capital with a stone fortress replacing an older mud fort. Kadhivel, *History of the Maravas*, pp. 34–7.

had found a means of affirming the newly strengthened bonds of affiliation which were intended to define and stabilise the domain of their ruling lord, and which also served to mark off the Siruvalli raja's dominions from those of his kinsman and rival the Setupati. On a smaller scale there had already been a similar development around the nayaka-ruled chiefdom of Salem. In 1623, when de Nobili was taken up as a kind of court guru by the ruler of this northern Tamil domain, the brother of one of the nayaka's affiliated chieftains became a baptised Christian under de Nobili's tutelage. As in Siruvalli, this move was part of a fitna-like bid for power within the palaiyam.<sup>50</sup>

For their part the Jesuits did make demands of their new affiliates; there were points at which the missionaries sought to behave as a source of impersonal ecclesiastical discipline and not as a collection of individual charismatics and gurus. In Siruvalli the Jesuits ordered the newly converted poligar to 'reform' his polygamous household, and the Marava raja duly repudiated all but one of his wives. On the surface this might seem to be much like any other assertion of church discipline, as in Malabar or the Parava localities, where the Jesuits had sought to impose what they defined as 'orthodox' Christian marriage practices amongst both the Syrians and their fisherman converts. But in this case too the missionaries' standards of propriety intersected in a convenient way with the poligar's own strategic aims. Although the zenana was a much prized sign of 'kingliness', the most important of the wives whom the Siruvalli raja dismissed was a close kinswoman of the Setupati's. The move was therefore a direct blow at the raja of Ramnad. The repudiation disgraced the woman and her kin, and it also drove home the point that the raja was now seeking to sever all remaining bonds of kinship and affinity between the two domains.<sup>51</sup>

In the other cases described above – in Ettaiyapuram and Sokampatti for example, where mission churches were patronised and protected by poligar chiefs – Christian shrines and missionaries were among the many resources to be amassed by an aspiring ruler as he sought to reach out, to minimise boundaries, to integrate as many centres of power as possible within a newly unified sacred landscape. Here, though, in the case of the

<sup>50</sup> Richards, *Madras District Gazetteers. Salem*, I, Pt 1, pp. 94–5.

<sup>51</sup> J. Bertrand, *La Mission du Maduré* (4 vols., Paris, 1850–4), III, p. 447. There was a correspondence between the moral proprieties prescribed by the missionaries, and the purified 'Sanskritic' conduct which enhanced status in the Brahmanical social order. The missionaries may not have recognised this, but as the poligar domains began to place new emphasis on hierarchical religion and purified domestic customs, Christianity and the adoption of these new customs allowed the Siruvalli Maravas to give off from the Setupati's domain while also assuming tokens of a purer caste lifestyle.

Siruvalli conversions, Christianity provided something different, a means to create and define boundaries and to mark out mutually exclusive affiliations and identities. Through their conversions, these Maravas and their dependants were disclaiming all ties to the Setupati and declaring their allegiance to the convert raja of Siruvalli. Thus the case of Siruvalli suggests that Christianity could be something other than simply one more of the many south Indian religious traditions through which devotees could gain access to sources of sacred power. Quite clearly the faith could sometimes – though not invariably – be perceived as a distinct and separate communal affiliation and as here, it could even be a basis on which to build new political affinities. This was certainly the Setupati's view of these conversion movements in the Marava poligar country. Indeed as a result of these perceptions the raja of Ramnad provided the Tamil country with its first locally martyred Christian cult figure. This ruler too saw de Britto as a holy man of great and awesome power. In his view, however, this power was being deployed against him, and it therefore constituted a direct threat to his campaign of state creation. De Britto had launched his mass conversions in the domains of the Setupati's rivals, and he then brought these destabilising forces even closer to home by converting the Setupati's army commander and several members of his household.

The solution was to neutralise the missionary's power. In 1686 the Setupati had de Britto forcibly ejected from his domains; when he returned in 1696 and proceeded to make new converts in the Ramnad country the raja had de Britto carried off to a remote forest hiding place where he was tortured, beheaded and impaled. David Mosse has traced the themes of asceticism, death and blood sacrifice which have come to feature in the de Britto cult. What is so notable here is that once again, the key figure in one of these powerful south Indian power divinity cults is a forest healer and holy man who has been martyred and bloodily dismembered. From Mosse's account it is clear that a European missionary was as readily incorporated into the local pantheon as an itinerant Sufi master. According to local tradition,

'after [de Britto's] execution there were eight days of unseasonal rain . . . washing the body away and scattering its parts as the saint had earlier requested be its fate. Then the shrine at Oriyur was also a source of power for others. Here it is the shedding of sacrificial blood which is central. Tradition has it, for example, that a drop of his blood fell into the blind eye of his Pallar executioner and restored it. The saint's blood was taken into the earth and turned it red. The earth representing his blood then became a source of healing and fertility'<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', pp. 430–1. Mosse focuses on the figure of the blood-stained martyr saint as a source of new life and regeneration who fits the south Indian model of the slain renouncer-king. *Ibid.*, pp. 428–33.

Mosse also notes that some years after the initial development of the Oriyur shrine its devotees established a second cult site at the spot where the saint's body was impaled on a wooden stake after its decapitation. It is this part of the story which stands out particularly in relation to the political aspect of the de Britto cult. According to a variant of the martyrdom legend which is still recounted by the saint's Marava devotees, the missionary's executioners beheaded the saint and then cut off the hands and feet of the corpse and tied them to the execution post 'because they feared his power'.<sup>53</sup> Whether or not all this butchery really took place, these details suggest that the tradition reflected the real political conflicts of the poligar country. What is implied here is that when the Siruvalli raja launched his challenge to the Setupati, de Britto became a focus, a source of power and dynamism, for this Marava poligar's expansive new regime. This is why it was not enough to kill the missionary. In the case of Khan for example, the 'rebel commandant's' severed limbs were transferred to new shrine centres across southern Tamilnad; as a result his dominion could still be seen as an active and expanding network of power even after his death. This is why it is said that de Britto's limbs had to be nailed down so as to 'immobilise his vengeful spirit'.<sup>54</sup> What is suggested here is the notion of the pir or holy man as a would-be conqueror, a figure of ever-expanding dominion. De Britto could not be neutralised as a source of danger to the Ramnad realm unless his body was 'immobilised'; only this could de-activate his power as a rival dominion-builder.

In the end the Setupati did succeed in wiping out this rival line of Marava domain-builders, and as a result the rulers of Ramnad were able to secure their dominance in these disputed tracts of the Marava poligar country. These events immediately slowed down the spread of Christianity among the region's warrior groups. Although the Jesuits still claimed the Marava country as an active 'mission field' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was certainly nothing like the pattern of lasting Christian affiliation which took place among the Paravas;

<sup>53</sup> Interviews, Kamanayakanpatti, Aug. 1977; Neill, *History of India*, I, p. 307; Ramaswami, *Ramanathapuram*, p. 90.

<sup>54</sup> Ramaswami, *ibid.* In Muslim central Asia pirs were also seen as rulers of dynamic realms, as at the shrine of the pre-Islamic Biblical hero Daniel at Samarkand. Daniel's body was thought to grow within its tomb: his devotees periodically extended the shrine's precincts so as to make room for him. In the middle of the nineteenth century, when the Russians invaded and annexed the Uzbek khanates, 'firangi' officials built a wall around the Samarkand shrine, thus terminating the pir's miraculous growth. As in the case of de Britto, the saint was immobilised; the wall de-activated his dominion and so reduced the real-life khanates of which the saint was patron and precursor-king to the status of inactive and neutralised dependencies of the *kaffirs*. Elizabeth E. Bacon, *Central Asians under Russian Rule. A Study in Culture Change* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1966), p. 113.

Christianity did not emerge as a universally acknowledged caste lifestyle for the Maravas and Akamutaiyars. In many areas the descendants of the early 'converts' who were claimed with such pride by the Jesuits simply ceased to be identified as Christians in any formal or institutional sense. It is true that autonomous cult centres such as the Suranam St James tree shrine continued to flourish and to receive active support from the Setupati and the region's other warrior rulers. But even at Suranam, an independent Christian shrine which Mosse shows to have been controlled by Marava devotees in its early days, the local Marava population ceased to be thought of as Christians by the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, and the shrine itself came to be dominated by newly settled Tamil Utaiyar converts from the Trichy region.<sup>55</sup> In this regard the Ramnad region was typical of quite a large expanse of the Tamil hinterland. These were areas in which Christianity took root in two ways, first, as a tradition of devotion focused on individual cult shrines, and secondly, as an adjunct of poligar dominion-building. It would seem, then, that this process of 'Christianisation' might have gone much farther in this part of the Tamil hinterland, and that what put a break on the spread of Christianity as a warrior caste lifestyle was the collapse of the most dynamic of these conversion-linked military campaigns.

### **Christian conversions in Vadakkankulam**

What did not die out in the Tamil hinterland were the traditions of cult veneration which grew up around figures such as St John de Britto. More and more Christian gurus and martyr-saints came to be revered as hero exemplars and power divinities. This coincided so well with the hagiographies circulated by the Jesuits that the Madurai mission's early history was transformed into a kind of Tamil folk epic much like those which described the coming of the first Sufi masters or the wars and triumphs of local pirs, pattavans and female power divinities. This sharing of literary reference was a powerful weapon for the mission. It helped to balance out the forces which were beginning to mark off many converts from the wider society, and it provided a measure of continuity for groups who might otherwise have been isolated and marginalised.

At the same time this Christian miracle literature helped to map out a new sacred geography for the Tamil convert groups. It has been seen that the site of de Britto's martyrdom was soon established as an important regional holy place, and these tales of epic mission-building helped to transform many other missionaries' graves into centres of worship and

<sup>55</sup> Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', pp. 61–2.

pilgrimage.<sup>56</sup> Of all the hinterland Christian centres in Tamilnad, however, the village of Vadakkankulam acquired one of the richest arrays of sacred reference. For the mission hierarchy and the colonial authorities Vadakkankulam became notorious as the scene of some of the fiercest and most prolonged multi-caste 'honours' disputes in south India; the reasons for this will be explored below.

The first reason for Vadakkankulam's importance as a Christian centre is the fact that the village has always had a central place in the de Britto tradition. It is in this locality that the missionary is supposed to have undergone one of the heroic ordeals which figure so prominently in the local hagiographical lore. According to these accounts Vadakkankulam was the scene of a titanic clash between de Britto and a group of hostile Hindu temple priests. The event is described in much the same terms as the contests in which a pir pits his powers against the supernatural skills of a Hindu yogi.<sup>57</sup>

Even more importantly, it was in Vadakkankulam that de Britto is said to have made the mission's first formal conversions amongst the Shanar palmyra cultivators of southern Tamilnad. The story usually holds that several hundred of these Tamil toddy tappers made a spontaneous commitment to Christianity as soon as de Britto appeared before them. The Shanars of southern Tirunelveli soon became one of the largest bodies of Christian 'converts' in the southern hinterland, and this is one reason why the site of these early Shanar 'conversions' acquired such importance in the foundation stories which were disseminated by the missionaries and their adherents.<sup>58</sup>

But while this really was an area in which de Britto carried out some of his most dramatic mass baptism ceremonies, there is an even stronger tradition about Vadakkankulam which focuses on the role played by independent Christian guru figures. One such individual has already been described: this is the Christianised Paraiyan 'faqir' who aroused so much hostility from the Jesuits, and who is known to have made contact with some of the early inhabitants of the Vadakkankulam locality.<sup>59</sup> Even so the key figure in the early history of Vadakkankulam is not this Christian 'faqir' but a Shanar woman known as Sandai Nadati who came to be

<sup>56</sup> In the village of Kamanayakanpatti a cult site has grown up around the grave of a Jesuit who died in the 1760s. Devotees seeking cures for ill health and infertility still worship at the site. As at Hindu and Muslim cult shrines they circumambulate the grave and make offerings of fruit and flowers.

<sup>57</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 125-6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*; Pate, *Tinnevely*, p. 90.

<sup>59</sup> One of the Jesuits encountered him in Vadakkankulam in 1715. Letter from Fr. Brandolini, SJ, in Bertrand, *La Mission du Maduré* IV, p. 345.

revered as the actual founder of the village. In local legends and biographical texts, Sandai is portrayed as a typical Christian guru or charismatic cult leader. She too is said to have been influenced by the religious traditions of the Paravas, and at some point in the 1670s she appears to have built up a group of disciples in her home village, ten miles from Vadakkankulam. Here again there is a wilderness theme: the story is that the group migrated with her to what was then an uncleared forest tract, and like the other founding cult figures of the period, she is said to have set up a small shrine containing a cross.<sup>60</sup> Her followers and the small population of Shanars, Paraiyans and other low-caste devotees who began to settle in the locality were almost certainly among these baptised by de Britto in 1684. By about 1690 Vadakkankulam was known as an established Christian centre, and the Jesuits had claimed it as part of their jurisdiction.

What was important in the case of the Ramnad Marava conversions was the collision of expansive new warrior domains in a relatively poor, barren and thinly settled region of the Tamil hinterland. The Vadakkankulam locality was established in quite a different environment. This was also a thinly populated region in the seventeenth century, with large tracts of uncleared scrub and forest, but its economic potential was very much greater than that of the eastern Marava domains. This new locality was situated on the fringes of Tirunelveli's so-called 'palmyra forest'. It was well placed along the trans-Ghat trade route which was becoming an important link between the weaving and cash-crop centres of southern Tamilnad and the rich entrepôts of the Malabar coast, and it was also in a zone of greater natural fertility than the Ramnad region. In addition state power was even more evanescent than in the heartland of Marava or Kallar poligar rule. Here there were no successful great chiefdoms like Ramnad or Pudukkottai. No one warrior community or landholding group had come to dominate, and this absence of secure political élites tended to give added importance to individuals, including the local cult leaders, who had achieved some form of sacred power and authority.<sup>61</sup>

Initially the followers of the independent Christian cult tradition at Vadakkankulam had no more than the usual loose and uncertain affiliation to the Madurai mission, but over the next thirty years the south Tirunelveli palmyra country became the scene of a great wave of Christian mass conversions: this was the sort of lower-caste conversion movement which made the region so well known during the colonial

<sup>60</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy', pp. 6–11; Durairaj, *Directory of Palaiyamkottai*, p. 48; Western, *Tinnevely Church*, p. 31.

<sup>61</sup> Ludden, *Peasant History*, pp. 18–26, 59–67, 81–96, Map 8 (p. 67h).

period. By 1720, the Jesuits claimed to have converted over 3,000 Shanars. With its strongly rooted autonomous cult tradition, Vadakkankulam became the natural focus for these new converts. There was a constant flow of new settlers to the area, and by 1713 the Jesuits recorded a population of over 4,000 in and around the locality. The majority of these migrants were Shanars although there were also substantial numbers of Paraiyans and members of low-caste artisan and labouring groups. Some had already become professing Christians before migrating to the new centre; others followed suit as the Jesuits began to establish more regular contacts with the locality.<sup>62</sup>

In spite of their low ritual status there were already pockets of modest prosperity amongst the Tamilnad Shanar groups in this period. Some had built up sizeable landholdings in the palmyra country; others were beginning to establish themselves as successful migrant traders in the fort-mart towns of Ramnad and Trichy. Many Shanars who settled in new frontier fringe villages such as Vadakkankulam were able to acquire a foothold in the trans-Ghat trade, first by transporting their own jaggery and toddy to the market towns of the southwest coast, and then by moving into the area's expanding interregional trades in tobacco, grains and foodstuffs.<sup>63</sup>

The Shanars' semi-specialised occupational tradition had also given them a comparatively firm sense of shared identity. They were not as highly organised as the Paravas, but the Shanars still had tighter networks of leadership and communication than most other south Indian agricultural groups. It is not surprising then that Christianity spread so rapidly among them. With their relatively strong caste institutions they possessed natural pathways for the transmission of a new religious affiliation. As has already been seen, the Jesuits explained the Shanars' mass conversions in rather more exalted terms: they thought that the rigours of palmyra cultivation had endowed the group with an innate moral purity and that they therefore had a natural predisposition to Christianity. One Jesuit observed in 1716,

By its numbers and its wealth, the Sanard [Shanar] caste is in comparison to all other castes admirably suited to Christianity. In fact Sanards can easily observe Christian practices. Their kind of life, the necessity of climbing palmyrahs, preserves against laziness, the fountain of all disorders. Besides they are gifted with an excellent nature, most are inclined to religious matters. Their widows do not remarry. Those who are Christian practise chastity out of virtue.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Caussanel 'Historical notes', pp. 140–2.

<sup>63</sup> Ludden, *Peasant History*, p. 48; Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnad*, pp. 95–7.

<sup>64</sup> Jesuit letter, Vadakkankulam, 8 Sept. 1716, in Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 140.

By the nineteenth century both Protestant and Catholic missionaries took a much harsher view of their Shanar converts. The reports from missionaries based in the palmyra country are full of splenetic condemnations of the Shanars as 'vicious', 'debased' and 'turbulent'; one missionary with thirty years of service amongst Shanar converts described them as 'everything that is low, cringing and yet oppressive towards lower castes, and insolent to higher'.<sup>65</sup> But while the Shanars were far from the ideal converts visualized by the early Jesuits, these eighteenth-century comments still throw much light on the phenomenon of mass conversions among the Tamil Shanars. It has been assumed that the group's exceptionally high rate of conversion to Christianity was a product of economic and social 'modernisation'. Newly prosperous Shanars are supposed to have expected Christianity to liberate them from a position of degradation and ritual inferiority within the Hindu moral order. But such explanations work no better for the Shanars than they do for other convert groups, whether Muslim or Christian. The richest Shanars, that is the cotton and tobacco trading merchants of north Tirunelveli and Ramnad who adopted the prestigious caste title Nadar in the early nineteenth century, showed no interest in conversion to Christianity, although the modernisation argument would make these the likeliest group to wish to 'opt out' of the Hindu moral order.

What really undermines this notion of opting out, though, is that virtually all Christian and Hindu Shanars as well as their Nadar offshoots engaged in violent and long-running status and 'honours' disputes throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Those waged by the Christian Shanars were based on notions of hierarchy and ceremonial precedence which were virtually indistinguishable from those of their Hindu neighbours, as the next chapter will show. But while these early Shanar converts were certainly not seeking to throw off the so-called disabilities of the caste system, Christianity did enable them to make changes in lifestyle of the sort which are usually described as examples of 'Sanskritisation'. As the Jesuit's statement suggests, they were beginning to take on customs and domestic practices associated with a 'purified' or upper-caste lifestyle.

Their missionaries accepted these moves as expressions of Christian propriety: they were thought to show that the Shanars were being improved and 'uplifted' by their new-found faith. This was why they impressed the Jesuits by banning widow remarriage and making other displays of piety and self-purification. Christianity merely provided them with additional reference points, an added set of tokens and models to

<sup>65</sup> Rev. C. Mead to Foreign Sec. LMS, 8 Oct. 1851, Box 4 Travancore 1848-58, LMSA.

draw from in these continual bids to remap the social landscape. Thus, like the Maravas of Siruvalli, this was yet another group who found a convenient overlap between the code of conduct prescribed by the missionaries and the 'Sanskritic' lifestyle which conferred added status in the indigenous moral order.

This focus on hierarchy and tokens of differential caste rank was much at variance with the tradition of autonomous cult-based Christianity which had grown up in the region. Many of these Shanars were migrants from the so-called Tamil 'core' zones – the old centres of Chola and Pandya dynastic power in which caste ranking schemes were more highly elaborated than in the Marava and Kallar clan domains. However, even the poligar fringe country was beginning to show signs of the new and very gradual shift towards a more hierarchical social order which was to become such a marked feature of colonial south India. These groups within the missionary domains were some of the earliest groups to take up new tokens of competitive status and caste rank.

### **Formal church authority in Vadakkankulam**

No matter how the Jesuits explained this upsurge in the conversion rate, the mass movements of the early eighteenth century made Vadakkankulam a place of great importance to the mission. The locality now contained one of the largest Christian convert populations in the Tamil hinterland, and it was particularly well placed to serve as a centre of ecclesiastical authority for the mission's Shanar adherents. Therefore as the Jesuits began to construct a more systematic form of organisation for their convert communities, they took special pains with the system of church authority which they devised for Vadakkankulam. The problem was that their Shanar adherents' sense of Christian affiliation was still bound up with the charismatic power of the old local guru figures. The Jesuits certainly recognised this, just as they recognised the importance of de Britto as a divinely empowered cult hero. As a result the region's new Shanar converts were still enjoined to venerate charismatic individuals such as Sandai Nadati of Vadakkankulam, and even today the region's official diocesan histories cite her and the other hinterland cult leaders as key figures in the early Christianisation of south India.<sup>66</sup>

But this did not mean that the missionaries were prepared to abandon de Nobili's rules about the observance of caste rank and ritual purity when the time came to create a formal hierarchy of mission office-holders. European missionaries were still scarce: native-born catechists,

<sup>66</sup> Durairaj, *Directory of Palaiyamkottai*, p. 48.

sacristans and schoolmasters would have to be appointed in major convert centres if a truly cohesive church was ever to be built up in the hinterland. As far as the Jesuits were concerned, the Shanars were people of low caste whose occupations were regarded as ritually polluting. If they were given positions of authority within the church it was assumed that the mission would sacrifice its hard-won prestige and alienate whole generations of potential high-caste converts.<sup>67</sup> The solution was to recruit mission office-holders from among the region's ritually clean caste groups. Elsewhere in the south the Madura mission drew its catechists and sacristans from Tamil and Telugu Brahman groups, but in Vadakkankulam as in many other south Indian localities the Jesuits brought in Christian Vellalas – members of the scribal and landholding Tamil Pillai groups – to fill these positions.

There were probably a few Vellala lineages in the vicinity of Vadakkankulam by the end of the seventeenth century, but the first Vellala who figures in any detail in the sources is an incomer named Chidambaram Pillai (1685 – 1757). This individual (who was also known as Sivakurunatha Pillai) is entered in the local genealogies as the founder of Vadakkankulam's most powerful and prestigious sat-sudra lineage. He is said to have come from Vitthalpuram near Palaiyamkottai, and according to the local biographical texts he served as a pantaram (non-Brahman ritualist) in Vitthalpuram's largest Siva temple.<sup>68</sup> The story is that at some point in the 1720s Chidambaram Pillai stopped in Vadakkankulam while travelling with his family on a pilgrimage to the great goddess temple Kanniyakumari. He is supposed to have been so struck by the locality's Christian devotional tradition that he settled in the village and placed himself under 'Christian instruction' there. Chidambaram Pillai was baptised in 1743 and took the name Gnanaprakasam Pillai. (This Sanskrit forename became a popular baptismal name among Tamil Christians: it translates as 'revelation of knowledge'.) Despite his apparent delay in receiving baptism, the Jesuits made their new convert an *upatēsiyār* (from Skt. *upatēsam* 'spiritual instruction') or salaried catechist of the Madurai mission.<sup>69</sup>

Gnanaprakasam Pillai was one of many Vellala Catholic office-holders who are said to have come from non-Brahman Hindu priestly lineages. It will be remembered that the Sendamankalam Vellala whose followers were protected by the Sokampatti poligar is said to have been the son of a pantaram from Madurai; among the Vadakkankulam Vellalas, one

<sup>67</sup> Western, *Timevelly Church*, pp. 26–7.

<sup>68</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy', pp. 13–17; Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 196–9.

<sup>69</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy' pp. 13–17.

leading family is said to have had connections with the *tampirān* (presiding official) of a Siva temple at Karumadai, and another line who settled in the village in the 1780s are supposed to have been descended from a family of tampirans from Kottar in southwest Travancore.<sup>70</sup>

These claims were of great importance to the Madurai mission. In this period the Jesuits were still struggling to establish the notion of a single unified church which was vested with true sacramental authority and could therefore claim to transcend the power of local low-caste cult leaders. As a result almost anything which underlined the special sanctity of the priesthood and its chosen office-holders was to be harnessed to the mission's cause. The key task for the Jesuits was to invest a group of their own local notables with as much power and status as possible, even if this meant an acceptance of prevailing Hindu notions of purity and sacred authority. The very term *upatesiyar* had strong connotations of Hindu preceptorship, and when they decided to give these *sat-sudra* converts a monopoly of mission posts and offices, the missionaries had no hesitation in invoking the traditions of ritual expertise and scriptural learning which were so widely associated with the Vellala caste category.<sup>71</sup>

The Vellalas were never a tightly knit community with strong institutions of leadership and a well-defined caste lifestyle. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Vellala affiliation was as vague and uncertain as that of most other south Indian caste groups. Vellala identity was certainly thought of as a source of prestige, but for that very reason there were any number of groups who sought to claim Vellala status for themselves, or who had at least adopted the most common Vellala caste title, Pillai. This meant that even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were traders and petty cultivators who called themselves Vellalas, as well as large-scale landholders and literate scribal groups. There was a strong tradition of Vellala temple service, and some of the groups who had come to be recognised as Vellalas shared a lifestyle of scrupulous ritual purity and filled positions as reciters (*ōṭṭuvars*), ritualists (*paṇṭarams*) and tampirans in south Indian temples and *maths* (foundations of ascetics). But there were also meat-eating Vellalas who worshipped blood-spilling amman divinities and took part in animal sacrifice and ecstatic possession rites.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> 1864 MS cited in Arpudam, 'Genealogy', p. 26; and oral account collected by Arpudam in *ibid.*, pp. 26–7.

<sup>71</sup> Ludden, *Peasant History*, p. 36. The Vellalas' special relationship with Tamil Brahmans is supposed to have guaranteed their high status in Tamil society, though this does not mean that all who claimed Vellala identity enjoyed the same rank and honours.

<sup>72</sup> Buchanan, *Journey*, II, pp. 329–31.

The amorphousness of this group – the fact that in the Tamil ‘fringe’ country particularly, the Vellalas were an open-ended status category rather than a community – was a great boon to the Jesuits. If none but sat-sudra converts could hold church office in the southern hinterland, then anyone who was allowed to take such a post was automatically certified as being from a ‘true’ sat-sudra lineage. In much of the southern Tamil country this monopoly was aimed specifically at Christian Vellalas. In effect the mission was offering its own endorsement to any Tamil Pillai lineage who wished to claim élite sat-sudra status. Once they had declared themselves to be official mission-linked Christian converts, such families were taking up a role which was directly analogous to that of the region’s highest-ranking Hindu Vellalas, those whose lifestyle was ritually pure and whose members held superior posts in major maths and temples. The Jesuits sought to highlight this connection so as to add weight to the new style of centralised church leadership. They therefore gave their support to the claims of one-time temple service which were being built into the family histories of these Vellala convert lineages.<sup>73</sup>

This then is the background to the great spate of conversions which took place among Tamil ‘Pillai’ groups in the first half of the eighteenth century. Any convert whom the Jesuits recognised as a ‘Pillaimar’ or Vellala was automatically deemed pure and priestly. Just as there were certain Malabar Syrians who were recognised as being ‘ordainable’ and therefore ritually superior, here too there was a special group who were marked off in a local gradient of purity and ritual status by virtue of being considered fit to hold posts within the mission. These were the people who were of sufficient rank and standing to exercise authority over other converts. Therefore under this new system of mission organisation the day-to-day functions of church office-holding were transformed into a set of ceremonial rights or ‘honours’. It was decreed, for example, that only Vellala catechists could accompany European missionaries on their tours; they alone could handle the communion vessels and other sacred objects, and only they could assist the priest in serving the mass. Like the Parava caste notables they and their families sat in special seats close to the Sanctuary during church services, and they alone could preside over daily prayers when there was no priest in the village. They also supervised the collection of fees for the maintenance of churches and the performance of festivals; in these formally organised Christian communities, power over church finance was an important status marker.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Arpudam, ‘Genealogy’, pp. 26–8; Caussanel, ‘Historical notes’, pp. 196–9.

<sup>74</sup> Caussanel, ‘Historical notes’, pp. 209–16. The Christian ‘Pillaimar’ were always greatly outnumbered by Parava, Shanar, Marava and ‘untouchable’ converts, but these eighteenth-century conversions of élite sat-sudra Tamils were still notable in a region where ‘converts’ were all thought to be of low caste.

There were built-in weaknesses in this new system. Localities such as Vadakkankulam already possessed families with a tradition of authority and sacred power. These were generally low-caste people, but as descendants of the early Christian guru figures they were the heart of the local bhakti style of Christianity which the Jesuits were so eager to limit and domesticate. Even so, the mission had nothing but recent migrants to pit against these recognised cult leaders. Like the Vadakkankulam upatesiyar Gnanaprakasam Pillai, catechists and other mission notables were necessarily men from outside the established Christian centres of the far south. Very little could be known for sure about their true origins and ancestral rank. Indeed the whole point of the Jesuits' strategy was to bind the Christian 'Pillaimar' to their own authority by making it clear that these families' claims to elite ritual standing were dependent upon the mission's patronage and recognition. This meant that the mission had created an inherently unstable system of leadership and, as the next chapter will show, the Shanars of Vadakkankulam were soon to challenge the Vellalas' claims of ritual ascendancy.

In the short term, however, it is clear that recruitment into mission service was perceived as being advantageous precisely because it usually did entail resettlement in new localities. As for so many other upwardly mobile specialist and service groups, these sat-sudra Christians found that migration to new areas made it much easier to establish themselves as persons of enhanced rank. Thus like their Shanar and Parava neighbours, the converted 'Pillaimar' could make gains in status which they would probably not have achieved as Hindus. The difference, though, is that the Paravas had their own notables and office-holders. Christians (and indeed Hindus) from other castes certainly came to venerate their shrines and to seek adjudication from the Paravas' caste headmen, but this was unofficial, part of the informal operation of cult networks and status hierarchies. But while the mission had never intended the Paravas to serve as a reference point for the wider society, this was precisely the role which the Christian 'Pillaimar' were expected to fulfil in hinterland centres such as Vadakkankulam.

Thus in a sense, the mission was helping to redefine the nature of caste identity for their new adherents. Through the offer of patronage and prestigious office-holding, the Jesuits had begun to recruit a disparate collection of incomers who had had little in common except a vague claim to Tamil sat-sudra status. These people were then welded together into a new caste category which was to be described as Christian 'Pillaimar' or Vellala. At the same time the mission was demanding that the Christian Shanars and all other hinterland convert groups acknowledge this population as being socially and ritually superior to them. On both sides, people who had once possessed a relatively loose and open-ended form of

caste affiliation were coming to define themselves in opposition to other newly constituted caste groups. There were Shanars who could claim no authority within the mission pecking order, and there were Vellalas who had been vested with tokens of rank and authority and were therefore hedged round with firmer and more explicit boundaries than they had possessed before conversion. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Jesuits were explaining this scheme in terms of a primordial separation of high and low, 'honourable' and ritually inferior castes. According to a missionary who visited Vadakkankulam in 1847,

The Vellalar is one of the most ancient and honourable castes in the country, and to which all the great and leading men belong. The Sanar caste on the contrary is very low, and consequently can never be ranked with the Vellalar; even in the Church they can not mingle with them, but must always fall behind.<sup>75</sup>

Although it was unintentional, what the Jesuits were doing was consistent with the process of caste formation which was taking place at this time, and with the general firming up of corporate and communal affiliations which was such a marked feature of the late pre-colonial period in south India. In this period the mission was behaving like the many south Indian rulers whose techniques of statecraft tended to sharpen caste and religious identities, even though their acts of patronage transcended formal communal boundaries. But what this meant for the mission's affiliated convert groups was that the old open-ended bhakti style of Christianity was fast disappearing in all the key centres of hinterland mass conversion. The mission was determined to create clear lines of authority for these communities; they were importing new groups of office-holders and vesting them with an authority based on caste rank and precedence. In place of the earlier cult-based devotional tradition there were now formal hierarchies of rank and office. These developments certainly did not detach Tamil converts from the wider social order, but they did create new sources of tension and conflict for the people whom the Jesuits were seeking to contain and discipline.

### **The Vadakkankulam warrior-martyr cult**

Although the leadership exercised by the Christian Pillai lineages remained extremely vulnerable, the mission worked hard to secure the ascendancy of their new office-holding élite. In Vadakkankulam the

<sup>75</sup> Bro. Brady, 'A Tour of the Mission' [1847], in typescript *Archives de la nouvelle mission du Maduré*, V, p. 131.

family of the first upatesiyar (catechist) Gnanaprakasam Pillai was guaranteed hereditary control of all major church offices in the locality. Gnanaprakasam Pillai occupied his post as catechist from 1743 until his death in 1757; he was succeeded as upatesiyar by his eldest son, grandson and great-grandson. His direct descendants also inherited the other key church offices in Vadakkankulam including the posts of *vatiar* (school-master) and sacristan.<sup>76</sup>

At the same time another way was found to buttress the claims of these Christian Vellala lineages. Up to this point most of the figures who had become the focus of cult veneration in the Tamil hinterland were either European missionaries like de Britto, or low-caste independent guru figures like Sandai Nadati of Vadakkankulam. In the second half of the eighteenth century the village became a centre for the veneration of a new cult hero named Devasakayam Pillai (*tēvasakayam*: 'beloved of God'). This was the first time that a Christian Vellala had become the focus of a local devotional tradition, and the Madurai mission took a leading role in popularising this new personality at the expense of the old Shanar heroine figure Sandai.

Devasakayam Pillai was a Nanjenad Saiva Vellala whose original Hindu name was Nilakanta Pillai. According to the local biographical traditions, he was born into a moderately prosperous landholding family from a locality near Kanniyakumari in southern Travancore.<sup>77</sup> He then became a soldier: once again we have a south Indian military man who chose to follow the Christian 'margam', and yet another historical personality who came to be venerated as a martyred warrior hero. Although on a more modest scale than the Muslim 'rebel commandant' Yusuf Khan, Devasakayam Pillai did play a role in the turbulent politics of the eighteenth century, and there are striking parallels between his cult tradition and those of the region's Muslim (and Hindu) soldier martyrs and cult saints.

In the 1730s Nilakanta Pillai was recruited into the army of the Travancore state-builder, raja Martanda Varma, and he became the protégé of the Belgian Catholic mercenary Eustace de Lannoy. As has already been seen, it was de Lannoy who had retrained the state's newly expanded fighting force, and with the patronage of this powerful state retainer, Nilakanta Pillai became a high-ranking officer of the Travancore army. In 1745 de Lannoy sponsored his protégé's conversion to Christianity, and it was at this point that he took the new baptismal name

<sup>76</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy', p. 26.

<sup>77</sup> A local Jesuit collected an account of his early life from one of the region's Vellala upatesiyars in 1876. This was transcribed as part of Arpudam's 'Genealogy', pp. 22–3. See also Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 196–9; Agur, *Church History*, pp. 280–2.

Devasakayam Pillai. He is also thought to have established links with the Christian Pillaimar population of Vadakkankulam at about this time. This is not surprising: Vadakkankulam was close to Devasakayam Pillai's home region, and since the locality now had well-established cross-Ghat commercial links with Travancore, there would have been every opportunity for a newly baptised Vellala to make contact with this important Christian centre. Today devotees in Vadakkankulam claim that Devasakayam Pillai was actually baptised in the locality with the Vellala upatesiyar Gnanaprakasam Pillai as his godfather.<sup>78</sup>

The next stage in the story is rather unclear. It is known that Devasakayam Pillai was executed in 1758, but the reasons for this are obscure. His biographers simply follow the conventions of traditional Christian hagiography: the death was a martyrdom; any high-ranking officer who embraced Christianity in a 'pagan' kingdom was doomed to face the wrath of his 'fanatical' Hindu overlords; and like the stories of de Britto's execution, the biographical traditions focus on the martyr's heroic Christian fortitude and on the miraculous events which transfigured his grisly death. The true story is probably much more complicated. The Travancore army was drawn from a wide range of religious and communal groups, and we know that the regime was far from being narrow or exclusive in its strategies of religious patronage. Furthermore the execution occurred some thirteen years after Devasakayam's conversion. It may be, however, that like Yusuf Khan, Devasakayam Pillai came to be thought of as a source of something like alienation or 'fitna' within the realm, someone who was suspected of wooing away the raja's client groups so as to build up rival patronage networks of his own. If this was the case, then Devasakayam's conversion may well have been a factor in identifying him as a potential rival, a would-be state-builder. This was certainly not because Christians were seen as being inherently alien to the Travancore regime, but because here too, a formal religious conversion could be taken as a token of new allegiance, just as it was for the raja of Siruvalli in his attempt to repudiate his ties to the Setupati of Ramnad.<sup>79</sup>

In any event the execution of this Vellala convert had an intense and galvanising effect on the Christians of the nearby Tamil convert centres. The execution took place only six miles from Vadakkankulam, at a hamlet called Kathadimalai. Tales of miracles at the site began to spread very rapidly in the region, and these traditions were then reinforced by the many oral and written accounts of the hero's life and martyrdom

<sup>78</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 196–7, Arpudam, 'Genealogy', p. 26; Agur, *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Agur, *ibid.*

which were disseminated by the Jesuits, and by the ballads and vernacular music dramas which recount the story of his martyrdom: these were still being performed at the region's church festivals in the early decades of this century.<sup>80</sup> Within a few years of the martyr's death Kathadimalai had become an established Tamil pilgrimage site, and the locality still attracts thousands of devotees every year.

What also happened after the execution was that Gnanaprakasam Pillai, the Vellala upatesiyar of Vadakkankulam, travelled to Kathadimalai to fetch the turban and shawl worn by the martyr at his execution. When the catechist returned to Vadakkankulam with the hero's garments, they were enshrined in the locality's newly built Holy Family church and revered as relics of great sanctity. Particular importance was attached to the turban which, like the turban of a Muslim pir, was perceived as an especially potent vehicle of the martyr's power.<sup>81</sup> The collection of these cult objects was an act which greatly enhanced the prestige and standing of the Vadakkanakulam upatesiyar's lineage. Gnanaprakasam Pillai's journey was itself portrayed as an heroic ordeal. It too became an episode in the cult legend and was cited as a model for all future pilgrims to the execution site, and the catechist and all his descendants were thereby marked out as having a special hereditary tie to the hero martyr. As the local hagiographies made clear, it was through them that the hero's relics had been transferred to Vadakkankulam. Since they were the first to have emulated the hero's ordeal they could claim a right of ascendancy in his cult.<sup>82</sup> Their role was therefore analogous to that of the Parava jati talaivan's lineage in the cult of Our Lady of Snows. It can also be compared to the role of a Muslim pirzada lineage or to that of the Kallars who served the cult of the pir Kat Bava: Gnanaprakasam Pillai and his kin were the recognised guardians of the relics, and the supernatural power which emanated from the hero and his cult objects became their special domain and inheritance.

One striking correspondence to the region's Muslim saint cults is that this upatesiyar lineage was seen as having acquired its special role within the cult because of the way in which it had expanded the spiritual domain

<sup>80</sup> Agur, *Church History*, pp. 283–6; Villavarayan, *The Diocese of Kottar*, pp. 23–4; Strickland and Marshall, *Catholic Missions*, pp. 49–54; interviews, Vadakkankulam, Aug. 1977.

<sup>81</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 196–9. The garments are still in the main Vadakkankulam church. Like the khelat which derives its symbolic power from contact with the body of the ruler, the sanctity of the cult saint's turban derives from this physical contact, and also from its significance as a symbol of kingship. Many dargahs display pirs' turbans as special objects of veneration. See Eaton, 'Court of man', p. 57.

<sup>82</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 197.

of the martyr-hero. The transfer of the relics was a kind of beating of boundaries like that which occurred in the cult of the Mylapore saint Dastagir Sahib. Every year at the time of the major Christian festival in Vadakkankulam, the feast of the Assumption, the martyr's relics were (and still are) mounted on a miniature chariot or *capparam* and carried in procession through the village. To its participants and sponsors, this procession was perceived as a march of triumph like the ceremonial car processions of the region's Hindu and Muslim cult figures, and like those of other Christian tutelaries.

Here too the festival's dominant theme is the assumption of kingship. Like a lesser Khan of Madurai, the slaughtered hero Devasakayam Pillai can be seen as having come into his kingdom once he became the centre of a regional saint cult, and this annual ritual is the confirmation of his dominion. Furthermore in Vadakkankulam the right to bear the *capparam* of the relics became one of the chief claims of primacy within the local ceremonial ranking system. Certainly by the last decades of the eighteenth century this was a right held exclusively by the locality's leading Vellala lineages, specifically by the descendants of the first catechist Gnanaprakasam Pillai.<sup>83</sup> This lineage had established its rights of pre-eminence by transferring the relics to Vadakkankulam. Thus when the relics were carried forth in the rite which proclaimed the power and ascendancy of the hero, the descendants of Gnanaprakasam Pillai would proclaim their own ascendancy in terms which identified them as foremost among the hero's subject-devotees. The cult and its relics brought fame and honour to the whole village: apart from the Tuticorin Virgin and the fragment of the True Cross at Manapad, the relics became the best known Christian cult objects in south India. But apart from endowing the village with this powerful source of sacred energy, the bringing in of the relics had served to widen the hero's domain. The event can thus be seen as a kind of spiritualised state creation; it broadened out the terrain in which the newly martyred hero could exercise his power.

What then of the Jesuit's role in the construction of this new cult tradition? The missionaries' versions of the locality's history maintain that Gnanaprakasam Pillai was 'despatched' on his journey to Kathadimalai by one of the local Jesuits.<sup>84</sup> The implication is that the mission set out quite consciously to mould and direct these local hagiographical

<sup>83</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 197-8. Like Khan, this martial hero acquired an elaborate sacred geography which was defined by the network of shrines housing his corpse and relics, and linking him to other Tamil cult figures. In addition to the Vadakkankulam shrine, devotees visit his burial place: this is at Kottar, in the church which houses the miraculous healing shrine of St Francis Xavier. Whitehouse, *Lingerings*, p. 223.

<sup>84</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 196.

traditions. If a Jesuit were to be given this key role in the legend then the missionaries could be elevated to the role of chief co-sharers in the hero's dominion. It would follow then that the story of Devasakayam Pillai could be used to drive home the idea of submission to the authority of the ordained priesthood: even the hereditary upatesiyar lineages were nothing more than subordinate agents of the Jesuits.

This inherent tension is never resolved. In the stories of Devasakayam Pillai it is never clear whether the expansion of this local sacred landscape is due to the Jesuits or to the initiative of the Vellala upatesiyar. This in turn is quite an accurate reflection of the local status system: it was never established for certain whether the Vadakkankulam Vellalas were mere clients of the mission or a priestly élite in their own right. The result was that the upatesiyar lineage took an exceptionally dynamic role in popularising the cult of the relics and in building up the locality as a centre of pilgrimage and long-term settlement. This may help to explain why the cult was so active in the later eighteenth century. Because their claims of ascendancy were inherently insecure, the lineage worked hard to show that the martyr's domain was still being extended and magnified, and that they and no-one else had the power to bring this about. Thus from about 1765 members of the lineage organised the collection of funds for the rebuilding of the locality's old Holy Family church and its shrine of the martyr's relics. At the same time the family toured the Tamil hinterland recruiting new devotees to the cult. Some of these affiliates actually came to settle in the village, and Gnanaprakasam Pillai and his descendants are credited with attracting a large influx of new migrants to Vadakkankulam during the second half of the eighteenth-century.<sup>85</sup>

Even more importantly, the upatesiyar family managed to build up a broadly-based devotional network emanating outward from the Vadakkankulam shrine. The cult of Devasakayam Pillai became one of the region's characteristically expansive devotional traditions. Under the sponsorship of this key Vellala lineage, devotees in a dozen or more different localities became regular donors to the shrine and its festivals. Many of these donors were from the same aspiring 'Pillaimar' background as Gnanaprakasam Pillai and the other Madurai mission catechists, but there were also contributions from newly Christianised Shanars, Kaikkolar weavers and even Paraiyans in centres such as Viravannalur, Radhapuram and Kuruvinnatham. In some cases these were ties which survived over many generations, with the original donors' descendants continuing to make their contributions to the shrine until well into the twentieth-century.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy', pp. 23–5.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

## *Christianity and colonial rule in the Tamil hinterland*

### **Status conflict in Vadakkankulam**

Like the Parava localities of south India, during the nineteenth century many of the Tamil country's hinterland Christian centres were torn by fierce ceremonial 'honours' disputes – that is by conflicts over issues of caste rank and precedence. These battles had much in common with the honours disputes which had become such a widespread feature of Hindu temple festivals (utsavams) throughout the south. (See note 49, p. 42 above.) This came as a shock to most European observers: Christianity was supposed to teach spiritual egalitarianism, so why were these converts fighting over tokens of caste honour and ritual primacy as if they were Hindus? This question can best be answered by looking at some of the conflicts in detail. The Vadakkankulam locality is the obvious starting place: as was noted above, this early Christian cult centre became the site of a long-running series of inter-caste honours disputes, and there is a rich array of source material on the locality and its conflicts.

Vadakkankulam had an inherently unstable social ranking system, and the distinctions between élite Christian Pillaimar and ritually subordinate Shanars were probably beginning to generate tension in the village by the end of the eighteenth century. The deepening of these cleavage during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a development which had parallels in many other parts of the south. But was this due to the so-called 'rigidities' of the Hindu caste system? Was the old caste order 'breaking down' as a result of social and economic modernisation, and was this why so many Christian converts were fighting to redraw their local ranking schemes?

The story of Vadakkankulam's nineteenth-century honours disputes begins with the locality's rapidly shifting demographic balance. Like many other villages in the newly settled Tamil fringe country, Vadakkankulam was still receiving an influx of new migrants in the second half of the eighteenth century. These newcomers included more Christian Shanars as well as a number of avarna or ritually inferior artisans and service families. The Shanars among them continued to make sizeable gains in the local trans-Ghat trading networks. At the same time the

growth of the Devasakayam Pillai cult and the service opportunities being offered by the Jesuits also attracted a steady stream of aspiring Christian 'Pillaimar' Vellalas. Some of these sat-sudra settlers were newly converted Travancore Vellalas from Aramboli and the Nanjenad region or the central Travancore-Tirunelveli border zone west of Tenkasi. Many more came from villages in the Ettaiyapuram palaiyam, and from other parts of the north Tirunelveli poligar country where there had been settlements of semi-autonomous Christian devotees since the middle of the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup>

In all something like 500 of these sat-sudra migrants arrived in Vadakkankulam before 1800.<sup>2</sup> Most of them cleared new tracts of mixed 'garden' and paddy land and established themselves as modestly prosperous cultivators: the vagaries of climate and rainfall always put limits on the growth of peasant agriculture in this part of southern Tamilnad. Within as little as three generations the Vadakkankulam locality was transformed from a newly settled cult centre with a large Shanar convert majority and a small élite of Christian Pillai ritualists, into a large and complex border trading village containing roughly equal numbers of Vellalas and Shanars.<sup>3</sup> In the beginning all of these new Vellala migrants claimed the same rights and 'honours' as the locality's original Christian Pillais, and the Jesuit authorities backed them up. But although the criteria of caste rank and ritual status laid down by the missionaries assigned totally different positions to Vellala peasant proprietors on the one hand, and Shanar palmyra cultivators and petty traders on the other hand, the economic gulf between the two groups was beginning to narrow during the last decades of the eighteenth century.

It will be remembered that the Society of Jesus was disbanded in 1773: in south India this meant that the fragile system of authority which the Madurai missionaries had only just installed in the hinterland was suddenly deprived of its focus. There were no more touring Jesuits to administer the sacraments, and so there was no-one to dramatise the ceremonial precedence of Vellala ritualists, or, by extension, the primacy of the locality's recent Vellala migrants. For a time it was possible to maintain some kind of rough balance between these groups, but as in the case of the Malabar Syrians, as soon as a new source of sacramental authority appeared on the scene the system's latent instabilities broke through and overturned the locality's delicate equilibrium.

<sup>1</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy', pp. 27-8, 37-8; Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 163-4.

<sup>2</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> According to a Jesuit census of 1864, Vadakkankulam contained 150 Shanar families, 115 Vellala and 20 Paraiyan families, 28 barber, washerman and miscellaneous savarna artisan families, and one Marava migrant family. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

The newcomer in this case was a priest of the Goan ecclesiastical hierarchy, Fr. Francis de Miranda. This luckless priest had been sent into the Tamil hinterland to try to assert Padroado control over the former parishes of the Madurai mission, a body which had been under the Padroado's rival authority, the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide. Fr. de Miranda arrived in Vadakkankulam in about 1804, and it was his appearance which sparked off the first of the locality's long-running status disputes. As soon as he arrived, the most prosperous of the locality's Christian Shanar traders appealed to the priest to redraw the lines of rank and precedence in the locality. What these families particularly wanted was for the priest to present them with a series of ceremonial 'honours' which had previously been reserved for the Christian Pillaimar. These closely resembled the tokens of rank and precedence which were so bitterly contested amongst the Paravas. They included the right to sit near the Sanctuary in the main village church and the right to approach the altar during mass.<sup>4</sup> Such a reallocation of church honours was something which only an ordained priest could perform. The whole scheme of local caste honours had only just been formalised when the Jesuits were expelled. With the collapse of the independent poligar system and in the absence of a dominant agricultural magnate group, there had been no-one else to reallocate tokens of rank and precedence in the locality.

The priest for his part was sympathetic to the Shanars' appeal. The Christian 'Pillaimar' were still very conscious of the fact that their pre-eminence had derived from the Jesuits, and so it was clear that the Vellalas' power would have to be cut back if the Padroado was to impose its own authority on this prestigious Tamil shrine centre. The result was a series of clashes and violent outbreaks which set the pattern for all subsequent status conflict in the village. In the genealogical texts which were compiled nearly a century later by the Jesuit chronicler Fr. Arpudam, this first great honours dispute is portrayed as a conflict centring on one particular Christian Vellala settler, a larger than life figure called Saverimuthu (Xavier) Paidhalai Pillai. These texts impart a semi-mythical quality to the Saverimuthu Pillai story, not because of its historical remoteness but because the local Vellala lineages saw it as a kind of foundation legend in reverse. The tale performs the function of a caste origin myth, but instead of marking out the rights and honours which chart the group's rise and consolidation, the story is one of loss and

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 200–8. Mosse describes a comparable (and equally contentious) church 'honours' scheme in Suranam. See 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism', pp. 287–394.

dislocation in which the Vadakkankulam Vellala clans are deprived of their due rights and honours by the machinations of the local Shanars.<sup>5</sup>

The genealogies describe Saverimuthu Pillai as a being of near-demonic power, a man 'of gigantic stature . . . [whose] very countenance inspired terror in the lookers-on'.<sup>6</sup> In fact he was a real-life personage who came from Pasurantanai near Ettaiyapuram; in the 1780s he settled in Vadakkankulam and soon confirmed his status as a superior savarna Christian by marrying into the élite Christian Vellala lineage founded by the catechist Gnanaprakasam Pillai.<sup>7</sup> Although the texts add much dramatic colouring to the tale, the story of Saverimuthu's rise and fall mirrors many of the changes which really did overtake the Vadakkankulam Shanars and Vellalas during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thus when Saverimuthu Pillai first arrives in the village he assumes a wide variety of ceremonial privileges. One of these honours is said to have been the right to take the leading part in the Christian music-drama staged during the annual Assumption festival: the popular Tamil literary forms disseminated by the Jesuits had become important props of the local honours system.<sup>8</sup>

The next stage in the story has Saverimuthu falling into debt to the local Shanar trader-cultivators. He fails to repay; there is a hint of sharp practice or impropriety, and when his creditors appeal to the Shanar and Vellala clan leaders or 'elders', Saverimuthu is stripped of all his church honours.<sup>9</sup> In a sense two stories are being interwoven here. One is a parable in which the community imposes its most stringent ceremonial sanctions against a notable who has compromised the local moral order. The second focuses on the Vellalas' loss of ascendancy: Saverimuthu becomes a representative of all the Christian 'Pillaimar' whose ceremonial precedence has now been challenged by the Shanars. Thus when Saverimuthu is disgraced, the text describes his vengeance against the Shanar traders whose new prosperity has caused his downfall. In a blaze of 'demonic' rage he denounces the Shanars to the Travancore authorities for hiding smuggled Tirunelveli tobacco in loads of firewood. This too may reflect real-life events: local traders probably did use such ploys to undercut Travancore's state commodity monopolies.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time the text shows that the Vellalas who produced these stories remembered their recent history as a battle in which matters of

<sup>5</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy', pp. 15–16, 35–6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy', pp. 35–6.

<sup>10</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy', pp. 17, 37–8.

ritual and economic advantage interlocked. In these accounts Saverimuthu also strikes back at his enemies by seeking to regain the ritual honours which he and his fellow Pillais have recently lost. In order to achieve this he is shown using a tactic which soon became one of the standard manoeuvres in these village status conflicts, just as in the region's coastal fishing and trading centres. But where the Paravas simply switched over between Goan and Jesuit church adherence, the Vadakkankulam Christians engaged in a much more wide ranging manipulation of Christian identities and affiliations. Their repertoire included threats to 'go over' to one of the rival Christian denominations in the region, as well as the recruitment of priests or catechists from different missions and churches, and the building of chapels or school-houses in order to establish strategic ties with a new ecclesiastical authority. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Christians all across south India had built up a whole armoury of these moves. Sometimes they made outright 'conversions' to a new church, but what usually occurred was a tactical flirtation with many different missions. The participants in these conflicts might keep a whole series of church affiliations in play at the same time, presenting themselves, usually temporarily, as 'inquirers' to one missionary group, while maintaining ties with catechists and priests from several others. These tactics enraged and bewildered the region's European missionaries, but they also gave contestants in these local honours disputes a set of endlessly flexible gambits which could be used to outflank their rivals and wring new tokens of validation and endorsement from their priests.

The Jesuits' records show that both the Christian 'Pillaimar' and the Christian Shanars of Vadakkankulam had become highly skilled in these tactics from the early nineteenth century. According to the genealogical texts, the first such foray into strategic affiliation-swapping occurred in about 1807, shortly after the Goan priest first arrived in Vadakkankulam. Again in these accounts it is Saverimuthu Pillai, the archetype of the aggrieved Vadakkankulam 'Pillaimar', who makes the first move. He is said to have presented himself to an English Nonconformist missionary who had just established an outpost of the evangelical London Missionary Society [LMS] in the south Travancore village of Meiladi, sixteen miles from Vadakkankulam.<sup>11</sup>

Paradoxically the London Mission's converts in this region were

<sup>11</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy, p. 16; Thanka Raj, *Home Church Nagercoil (CSI) Triple Jubilee 1819-1969 Souvenir* (Nagercoil, 1969), pp. 1-10. On the early activities of the LMS in this area see Western, *Tinnevely Church*, p. 126; Mateer, *Land of Charity*, pp. 260-3; *Mission Field* 8:91 (1863), p. 160.

almost all Shanars and Paraiyans, a point which supports the view that Saverimuthu intended this as nothing more than a short-term tactical move. Apparently Saverimuthu appealed to the missionary for instruction in Protestant doctrine for himself and a number of other Vadakkankulam Vellalas. The LMS rose to the bait – India's Protestant evangelicals were always keen to make inroads against the 'abominable papists' – and so Saverimuthu sold the mission a plot of village land on which he and some of his fellow Vellalas then built a small prayer house. The LMS missionaries accepted this as a clear-cut rejection of Catholicism and assumed that their new Protestant 'converts' would sever all their existing religious ties in the village.<sup>12</sup> But these Christian 'Pillaimar' had no intention of opting out of the local moral order, or of abandoning their claims of primacy within the locality's established ceremonial honours system. On the contrary: the key point as far as they were concerned was the siting of the new Protestant prayer house. The Pillaimar had ensured that the plot sold to the LMS for the new chapel was situated right on the village's main procession street. This was a thoroughfare running for part of its length along the edge of the small Vellala residential quarter and terminating at the entrance to the nineteenth-century church of the Holy Family in which the relics of the warrior-martyr Devasakayam Pillai had been enshrined. In this respect the locality had acquired the same sort of spatial layout which characterised Tuticorin and most of the region's other long-standing Christian shrine centres. Here too, the route marked out by the main church procession street was used by all Christian marriage, funeral and festival processions in the village. Together with the church itself the street had come to be regarded as an arena in which to constitute relationships of status and ceremonial honour within the locality.<sup>13</sup>

By forging these links with an outside missionary group, the Vadakkankulam Pillaimar were able to strike a blow against the new rights and honours which the Goan priest had conferred on the locality's Shanar population. As was often to be the case in Vadakkankulam, the celebration of the August Assumption feast – the locality's largest processional festival – provided the occasion for this challenge. Like other major Christian festivals in the Tamil country, this event was celebrated with the dragging of a great Hindu-style ceremonial *ter* (chariot); this was also the time when the Devasakayam Pillai relics were displayed and venerated by the assembled worshippers. What the Vellalas did was to build a *pantal* (a decorated bamboo canopy) in front of their new

<sup>12</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy', p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Protestant chapel. This blocked the path of the ter; it therefore constituted a classic assertion of ceremonial precedence just like those which were becoming a familiar part of south India's Hindu religious conflicts. Here too the dissident group was claiming control over the most prestigious 'sacred space' in the village while simultaneously preventing their rivals from gaining access to it. The Pillaimar group then added to this provocation by inducing an LMS catechist from Travancore to preside over prayers and hymns in the new chapel during the whole of the Assumption festival.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly Christian rites and confessional affiliations gave these groups just the ammunition they required to pursue gains in the region's newly constituted honours system. As a result their bids for enhanced caste status sparked off precisely the sort of violent upheaval which occurred at the climax of many Hindu 'honours' disputes. In the end, after weeks of violent outbreaks, the Goan priest made an appeal to the British commander at Palayaimkottai. This officer was a Catholic; he was alarmed by the priest's tale of parish 'mutiny', and he forced the Vellalas to tear down their pantal.<sup>15</sup>

This clash had two important results. First, it established a permanent Protestant foothold in Vadakkankulam: even during the long intervals when no LMS missionary visited the town the Protestant chapel survived as a reminder of the dispute and of the usefulness of tactical sectarian shifts in village conflict. Secondly, the defeat of Saverimuthu Pillai did much to firm up the sense of exclusive caste-based opposition which had already been developing in the locality. After the destruction of the pantal, local Shanars built an effigy of Saverimuthu Pillai and carried it in a raucous mock funeral cortège; the figure was then burnt in the village waste ground.<sup>16</sup> This was an act of vilification much like the black-flag processions and sandal-garlandings which are used to stigmatise public targets in India today. But as in these twentieth-century displays, the mock funeral was not just a personal attack. Like the building of the Protestant pantal, the procession took place in the disputed festival street. It therefore constituted a claim of ceremonial

<sup>14</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 204; Arpudam, 'Genealogy', p. 16. This clash had much in common with one of 1810-12 involving a Vishnu temple in the Ramnad raja's territory. Here too there was a violent outbreak over the blocking of the sacred chariot's procession route. Collec. to BOR, 1 Dec. 1812/BOR vol. 596/17 Dec. 1812/57-8/pp. 16301-36/TNA.

<sup>15</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy', p. 17. The LMS catechist was recalled to Travancore, and the priest excommunicated Saverimuthu Pillai. For the time being the choice of alternative religious affiliations was still too limited for such tactics to succeed; Saverimuthu underwent public penance and was re-admitted to the church. *Ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

precedence for all Shanars in the locality, and the result was an outbreak of rioting and house-burning which engulfed the entire village. This was a case then in which confrontation had firmed up corporate boundaries between groups who now defined themselves exclusively as Shanars and Pillaimar. It helped to confirm the element of hierarchy and competition in what had once been an open and fluid social order, and it also established a pattern of violent corporate conflict which was to prevail in Vadakkankulam for the rest of the nineteenth-century.<sup>17</sup>

### **Shrines and status: the demand for a divided church**

After another fifteen years of clashes and outbreaks, the same Goan priest Fr. de Miranda tried to end what he saw as the scandal of the locality's still-simmering honours disputes. In the hope of ending conflict in the village once and for all, he drew up a formal treaty setting out the ceremonial rights and privileges to which the Vadakkankulam Shanar and Vellala lineages were entitled.<sup>18</sup> This 1824 Vadakkankulam 'memorial' was the first of many such intended settlements: like all the others, though, it only heightened the sense of collective confrontation through which the two groups now defined themselves. This was partly because the imprecise wording of these documents always generated new conflicts about the terms of earlier settlements. There was a further problem of terminology as well. The contenders in these disputes were always described simply as 'the Shanars' and 'the Pillaimar'. As in the early British ethnographies and census reports this was just the sort of arbitrary classification which helped to reshape caste in terms of opposing ranked interest groups.

In fact these settlements could never create any lasting equilibrium in the locality. The missionaries might have appeared to be allocating rights and honours in the manner of a Hindu king arbitrating in temple honours disputes, but all they were really doing was to tantalise their parishioners. Time after time they handed out small gains which were just enough to provoke new claims and assertions without establishing either group in a clear position of primacy. Thus in the case of the 1824 settlement the Vellalas were granted some of their old key honours, including the right to carry sacred images on capparams during church festivals. But there was no mention at all of some of the most hotly contested ceremonial rights, including the right to keep the church treasury keys, and the right to serve at mass and decorate the altars. The

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* See also Guchen, *Cinquante ans*, II, p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 199–200.

document also failed to pronounce on the key question of whether the Shanars were to be allowed to sing hymns in the church.<sup>19</sup> During the first quarter of the nineteenth century this had become a much-disputed ceremonial privilege in Vadakkankulam. The Vellalas claimed that they alone held this right, possibly because it evoked the prestigious role of the Vellala ottuvars who chanted the sacred bhakti hymns in Hindu temples, and they fought furiously to stop local Shanar lineages from taking it on as one of their new local honours. Certainly hymns and devotional texts had been an important feature of the region's early semi-Christian cult worship. This is particularly striking because it shows how an act of devotion which had derived originally from the region's open and non-hierarchical bhakti religion and then from its bhakti-style of cult Christianity had been transformed into a token of precedence and hierarchy for these warring Christian convert groups.

Once it became clear that the 1824 treaty had failed to grant the aspirations of either side, all festival celebrations were abandoned in Vadakkankulam for the next fifteen years. Between 1824 and 1838 the villagers stopped the enactment of the annual Assumption feasts as well as every other corporate ritual involving village-wide displays of caste status. This too was becoming a much-used ploy in Hindu society, so that today castes or lineage groups may withdraw from a locality's temple festivals rather than submit to an unacceptable allocation of shares and honours. In Vadakkankulam the regular levies known as *mahimai* which had been instituted in the locality were also suspended at this time, since the collection of church offerings had itself become a token of rank and honour.<sup>20</sup>

Predictably enough, the French and Belgian priests who began to move back into the region in the 1830s failed to grasp the meaning of these ploys. Like their colleagues on the 'fishery coast', they too were men of fierce reforming zeal. They believed that the villagers' refusal to enact festivals and pay tithes sprang from 'spiritual laxity' or even a withering away of Christian identity. Although their predecessors had laid down the foundations of the Vadakkankulam honours system, these new missionaries thought that corporate rituals had been suspended because the local population had lost interest in them and had become corrupted and 'paganised' during their long period without European missionaries.<sup>21</sup> In fact the real problem was just the reverse of what the

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 210–14. See D.B. McGilvray, 'Mukkuvar Vannimai: Tamil caste and matrilineal ideology in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, in McGilvray, ed., *Caste Ideology and Interaction* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 84–97.

<sup>21</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 210–14.

missionaries thought: as the region's social order had become increasingly stratified and contentious these rites had become a focus for too many irreconcilable aspirations. Far from being devoid of meaning they were too dangerous, too important to stage in the absence of a stable religious hierarchy.

In 1836 a French Capuchin missionary from Pondicherry strayed into Vadakkankulam. As far as he was concerned the local Christians had fallen into 'error' and indiscipline during the absence of formal mission authority in the village; they were neglecting sacred rites and observances and thus in his eyes were strayed sheep crying out for reclamation.<sup>22</sup> This was the line which almost all subsequent missionaries were to take in the locality. Over the next seventy years Vadakkankulam was to be hit by a steady stream of missionary reformers seeking to purge the locality's Christians of all sorts of supposed errors and improprieties. Indeed although the European missions came to view Vadakkankulam as an especially 'refractory' village, this was a trend which affected Christian convert centres all over south India during the colonial period. As this chapter will show, a style of crusading reformism – a positive eagerness to confront convert groups and denounce them for their 'improper' practices – became one of the hallmarks of Protestant and Catholic missionaries all across the south.

This zeal to purify Christian observance, to impose institutional authority on convert groups and to standardise belief and practice, had much in common with the tone and aspirations of many Muslim reformist groups. While these were largely parallel rather than overlapping developments, there were Muslim reformers in both north and south India who responded to the missionaries' proselytising campaigns by taking over some of their methods and vocabulary. Thus for Christians as well as Muslims (and Hindus) the nineteenth century was a period when militant purifiers and 'revivalists' were gaining new-found prominence. This did not produce a single standard of belief and worship, a pervasive 'Islamisation' or 'Christianisation' of religious life; the outcome of such campaigns was often far from what had been intended by the self-styled reformers. But like Hinduism, south Indian Islam and Christianity were becoming increasingly formalised in the period of British rule, and confrontations between missionaries and converts as well as Muslims from either end of the purist/cult belief spectrum were all a product of these trends.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>23</sup> For north India, see A.A. Powell, 'Muslim reaction to missionary activity in Agra', in C.H. Philips and M.D. Wainwright, eds., *Indian Society and the Beginnings of Modernization c. 1830–1850* (London, 1976), pp. 141–57.

When the Pondicherry Capuchin moved into Vadakkankulam in 1836, the priest's solution was to draw up yet another Vellala-Shanar compact. The document called for the regular payment of tithes and festival levies and the restoration of festivals. For the first time the Shanar lineages were to have a notable of their own to collect the periodic mahimai levies. Although sixteen families actually signed the settlement, its provisions were too radical for the locality's Vellalas, and the arrangement soon collapsed like all the others. Thus when two Jesuits of the newly re-instituted Madurai Mission reached Vadakkankulam in 1838, they too found the locality in what they perceived as a state of decay, indiscipline and disorder. Like the Pondicherry priest, they saw their task as one of regeneration and reform: formal church authority would have to be re-imposed over the locality and its 'strayed' parishioners; a full sacred calendar with all feasts and holy days would have to be maintained. In addition to this concern to impose standard church practice in the village, they too focused on the issue of cash levies. To the missionaries it was a mark of discipline and Christian propriety for parishioners to make regular contributions to their church and its festivals.<sup>24</sup>

Characteristically one of the new missionaries issued a long series of orders designed to regulate the village's mahimai levies. As in 1836 these contributions were to be supervised by Shanar and Vellala notables chosen by their caste fellows; both sets of caste office-holders were to be endowed with special rights in festivals and church rites.<sup>25</sup> Clearly the missionaries did not intend to challenge the underlying logic of the system: church rites and festivals were still to be the focus of a locality-wide ceremonial ranking scheme. At the same time, though, the Jesuits refused to confirm the Christian 'Pillaimar's' old monopoly of leadership and honours. Once again there was an attempt to create a group of élite Shanar office-holders to balance out the rights of the Christian Vellalas, and in order to ensure that final authority rested with the priesthood, the document specified that it was for the missionaries and not local caste notables to take the initiative in scheduling festivals and disbursing mahimai contributions.

Like many nineteenth-century Muslim 'purists', these radical new-broom Jesuits held that the key to spiritual revitalisation in 'lax' or problem localities was the building of new places of worship – new mosques in Muslim centres, new churches in ailing Christian communities. It all seemed self-evident. If a locality was engaged in an

<sup>24</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 214.

<sup>25</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 217–20.

ambitious church or mosque-building programme, if it was applying its resources to the construction of sites for formal or 'orthodox' worship, then its spiritual life must be active and dynamic, and there should be little difficulty in rooting out accretions of 'error' or deviant practice amongst its worshippers.<sup>26</sup>

In the eyes of the Jesuits, Vadakkankulam showed all the key signs of spiritual decay. The old Holy Family church was dilapidated, and its festivals were still in suspension. The rulings of priests and missionaries were being challenged or ignored; Protestant 'heresy' had gained a foothold in the locality, and its church affairs were rife with conflict and violence. In 1839 the Jesuits ordered the Vadakkankulam Christians to demolish the Holy Family church and contribute funds to build a replacement.<sup>27</sup> This, it was thought, would restore and galvanise the locality's ailing religious life. Donations would flow in as a sign of its revitalised faith and spirituality; the Jesuits would be seen as founder-benefactors of the new church, and the villagers would gain a sense of respect and dutiful obedience to their missionaries. It was also held that the village's conflicts were legacies of an old and corrupt past. With new festivals and a new venue for daily worship the Jesuits believed that there could be no further basis for honours disputes in the locality.

These expectations were soon confounded. To the Vadakkankulam Vellalas, the Holy Family church with its long tradition as a centre of the Devasakayam Pillai cult was one of the last remaining props of their élite standing. They therefore viewed the plan to demolish it as proof that the Jesuits intended to deprive them of all their old rights and honours. The Shanars took their cue from the Pillaimar and issued impassioned demands for a new church, while the Christian Vellalas launched a campaign aimed at disrupting all church activities in the village. The 'Pillaimar' took to blocking every attempt to pull down or even repair the church so as to prevent any possibility of Shanar gains within the sacred precincts; they delayed or withheld tithes and mahimai offerings, and they denounced, harangued and even threatened the embattled local missionary.<sup>28</sup>

Over the next ten years the mission's policy led the Vadakkankulam Vellalas to try another series of flirtations with outside ecclesiastical bodies. This time, despite the fight which the Vellalas had waged a generation earlier against the Goan Padroado priest Fr. de Miranda, the town's leading Pillaimar now appealed to the Padroado episcopal

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, p. 358.

<sup>27</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 220.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

hierarchy at Cochin to send them a new parish priest. What they apparently had in mind was a kind of show-down in which each group matched the power of his client priests against the other's, much as rival armies had once matched the power of their accompanying Sufis. The Cochin church authorities would have been delighted to take over the Vadakkankulam church and oust the Jesuits from this prestigious locality. After several outbreaks of violence, the Collector ruled that the Goan hierarchy had no valid title to church property in Vadakkankulam and so for the time being the Padroado failed to renew its foothold in the village. This did not end the conflict; there were further confrontations between the Jesuits and the Vadakkankulam Vellalas in 1847 and 1848.<sup>29</sup>

All these clashes seem to have encouraged the local Shanar trading families to launch a new bid for higher rank and honour in the village. In 1849 one of Vadakkankulam's most prosperous Shanar traders announced that he was planning to take his daughter's marriage procession through the Holy Family church street, with the bridegroom seated in a palanquin. Both the use of the church street and the placing of the groom in a palanquin were marks of élite standing which had previously been reserved for Vellala Christians. Furthermore, although this was yet another of the locality's long-running battles for access to the village procession route, what the Shanar had in mind was an even more daring act of defiance than the mock funeral cortège of 1807. This was because there had been a major expansion in the number of Vellala households in the village since 1807. (In addition to the Shanars, who were still in the majority, there was also a sizeable population of untouchable Paraiyan agricultural labourers, most of whom were Christian converts, and a substantial number of washermen, barbers and other affiliated service people.) The enlarged Pillaimar settlement now straddled the church street along its entire length, and so the marching Shanars, no doubt noisily proclaiming their new claims, would have passed right through the heart of the Vellala residential quarter.<sup>30</sup>

The Vadakkankulam Vellalas came up with a well-judged ploy to counter this move. They persuaded the local taluk magistrate that the marriage procession was intended as cover for a Shanar plot to invade and sack their residential quarter, and the bride's father and fifty other Shanars were arrested and heavily fined. As was often to be the case in these disputes the local missionary was caught in the middle. The resident Jesuit had antagonised both Shanars and Vellalas by trying to

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 221–5.

<sup>30</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy' (from an account compiled by a local Vellala in 1910), pp. 15–16; Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 229–31.

remain neutral, and when he refused to intercede with the police and the magistrate on behalf of the arrested Shanars it was the turn of the Shanar trading families and most of the other Shanar lineages to boycott mass and launch a search for new ecclesiastical patrons. This group too showed its skill in devising moves by which they could threaten mass defections and force concessions from the priest without making a full commitment to the Protestants. On this occasion fourteen Shanar families withdrew their children from the locality's Jesuit school and sent them to a nearby school which was being run by the Protestant Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, one of the two Anglican missionary organisations which were now active in the southern Tamil country.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time another group of Vadakkankulam Shanars launched an appeal for patronage and support from that most eminent of all Christian caste notables, the Parava jati talaivan. Despite their lack of ritual and social ties with the Paravas and their caste notables, these hinterland Shanars thought that the jati talaivan might be willing to use his contacts with the Padroado authorities on their behalf and that this would induce the Goan hierarchy to send them a more sympathetic priest. Although the Parava headman was involved in a similar battle over ceremonial honours and ecclesiastical jurisdiction at this time, he refused to become involved with the Vadakkankulam Shanars.<sup>32</sup> Even so the attempt shows that almost any of the region's caste and denominational boundaries could be crossed in the search for allies and ecclesiastical patrons.

It was at this point that the Vadakkankulam Christians first conceived the idea which made them and their parish squabbles famous throughout south India, and which led to the construction of one of the oddest convert churches in the subcontinent. It has been seen that in Tuticorin the desire for firmer intra-communal boundaries led to a campaign in which the jati talaivan and his opponents sought to out-manoeuvre one another by building a series of walls and barriers around their disputed church precincts. In Vadakkankulam too, the two competing parties became ardent wall-builders. What happened here is that shortly after the riot of 1848, a delegation of leading Shanars and Vellalas presented the Jesuit Vicar Apostolic with a demand for a railing or barrier to

<sup>31</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy', p. 16. On the proliferation of Anglican mission centres in Tirunelveli, see Pate, *Tinnevely*, pp. 93-7, 372-407; D.S.G. Muller and V.J. Abraham, *The Trail of the Tirunelveli Church* (Tirunelveli, 1964); Frykenberg, 'The impact of conversion and social reform', pp. 192-204.

<sup>32</sup> Arpudam, 'Genealogy', p. 17.

separate Shanar and Vellala parishioners by caste in the Holy Family church. It is clear that both sides believed that they would benefit from a system of segregated church seating. Up to this point the population had been battling over tokens of rank and precedence without any real hope of a long-term resolution. The problem was that either group might suffer an irretrievable loss of standing in this sort of perpetual and open-ended competition. The way out for both groups was to set up a universally accepted limit or reference point within the locality's shared 'sacred space'. This reference point was not conceived as an abstract or idealised status marker, but as a tangible boundary to be built within the most important ritual arena in Vadakkankulam, that is in the village's main church.<sup>33</sup>

While the Jesuits had originally helped to inject these ideas of hierarchy and rank into the locality's social order, the notion of a fixed and formalised boundary marker did not come from the missionaries. In fact the Jesuits were horrified at the notion of a barrier to wall off one caste of parishioners from another, and they continued to fight against the proposal for the next twenty years. In this case then it is not the Europeans – neither church officials nor colonial authorities – who can be held responsible for erecting new caste or communal boundaries in what had once been a wide-open social order. Here it was the local people themselves who had initiated the idea and who faced strong (though ultimately unsuccessful) opposition from the European authorities in their campaign to erect this most literal-minded of caste boundaries.<sup>34</sup>

In 1852 the Jesuits finally managed to force through the demolition of the old Holy Family church. The missionaries had recognised that virtually every detail of design and siting for a new church would be charged with the most contentious questions of status and honour. The building of any permanent new structure would have to be preceded by months or even years of negotiation, and as a stopgap, the parish decided to build a small chapel on the vacant church site. Despite the missionaries' misgivings it was agreed almost immediately to allow the principle of segregated seating within this chapel, which was dedicated to St Aloysius. This arrangement too was supposed to be temporary; the Jesuits thought that they would be able to block the building of caste barriers when the locality's permanent church was eventually built. Thus a wooden railing was installed down the centre of the chapel: Vellalas and other sat-sudras were to worship on one side of the nave and

<sup>33</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 225.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Divided seating arrangements had been devised in some eighteenth-century mission churches. See Neill, *History of India*, II, p. 37.

all other Vadakkankulam Christians – Paraiyans, washermen and members of other ritually impure groups – were to be placed on the other.<sup>35</sup>

Whatever the expectations of the missionaries and the local parishioners, this arrangement did nothing to wipe out conflict in Vadakkankulam. The installation of the barrier railings merely created a new bone of contention in the locality. Once the Shanars realised that the new system would class them visibly and indelibly with the lowest ranking avarna caste groups in the village, they began a long-running campaign for a new tripartite division of worshippers. What they wanted now was to exclude the Paraiyans and other low caste groups from their section of the chapel, an arrangement which would give them exclusive control of their own miniature sacred precinct.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, now that they were rid of the old church with its ties to Vellala ceremonial primacy, the Shanar trading lineages launched yet another bid for key rights and honours in the Vadakkankulam Assumption festival. By this point the Jesuits had persuaded the village to revive the Assumption feast. As before, this pre-eminent village ritual was recognised as the principal determinant of rank and status in the village. This made it an obvious target for a new Shanar-led honours dispute. There were outbreaks of violence at festival time throughout the 1850s. The Jesuits tried to divert the Shanar trading families by offering them control and total primacy in a new festival of St Aloysius. The Shanars rejected this plan, boycotted the new festival and clashed repeatedly with the Vellalas over such passionately debated issues as whether Shanars as well as Vellala notables would be allowed to carry torches and processional flags in the Assumption festival, and whether the Vellalas could be made to surrender their sole control over the Assumption capparams (platforms for sacred images).<sup>37</sup>

Over the next ten years the Vadakkankulam Shanars tried again and again to persuade the mission to endorse these claims. The Jesuits' various treaties and proposed festival schemes never satisfied them, and so the Shanars orchestrated several spectacular assertions of power and primacy. On one occasion the Jesuit Vicar Apostolic – the Jesuit's chief episcopal dignitary in south India – was said to have turned and fled when he was mobbed by a crowd of Shanars during a ceremonial visit to Vadakkankulam.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 233–4.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 240–6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247. He was to have been carried in his palanquin along the village procession route, and the welcoming ceremonies would have been inside the Vellala residential quarter. To the Shanars this was a Vellala plot to monopolise all the prestige to be derived from the Vicar Apostolic's visit. A few weeks later a Carmelite 'Propaganda'

These conflicts also illustrate the ambiguous position of the priesthood amongst south Indian Christians. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it had become common in Parava centres as well as in mixed-caste hinterland localities such as Vadakkankulam for Christians to challenge, abuse and even attack their missionaries. Of course all these clashes were taking place at a time when every south Indian mission organisation was trying to establish its own priests as the sole source of religious authority in the region's Christian convert communities. The problem for the convert groups was that they no longer possessed any other source of priestly power and validation. The old autonomous Christian guru figures had been supplanted; the state had ceased to allocate ceremonial rights and honours, and so the priest or missionary had become indispensable to any village faction or caste group which was trying to secure its place in a local honours scheme. But while most of these groups accepted the need for outside priests or missionaries, they were also willing to make rapid and often self-contradictory leaps from one Christian denomination to another: if one priest refused to co-operate then another might do just as well.

Clearly all priests and clerics were seen as being equipped with much the same endowment of sacred power. As a result they were virtually interchangeable in the eyes of the region's Christians and were certainly not recognised as figures of all-dominating authority. In many of the localities which proved most adept at these affiliation-swapping tactics, warring factions had begun to behave as if they had reduced their priests and missionaries to the status of dependent ritualists who could be made to dispense the sacraments and provide them with tokens of ceremonial honour on demand.

No European cleric would have accepted such a demeaning view of his position. None the less for their own reasons – and in particular because of the eagerness of Protestant and Catholic missions to chalk up numerical victories against one another – even the most distinguished south Indian missionaries were willing to take part in the game of nineteenth-century affiliation-swapping. In 1865, for example, the major Vellala lineages of Vadakkankulam approached the great Tamil linguist Robert Caldwell (later Anglican bishop of Tirunelveli and the

cleric from Quilon also tried to enter the village. This too was seen as a move to bolster the Vellalas' ceremonial standing; the unfortunate Carmelite was driven from the village with a rock-throwing Shanar crowd at his heels. *Ibid.*; *Madras Catholic Directory for 1860*. Like the Jesuits, the Travancore Carmelites were under the authority of the Congregation of the *Propaganda Fide* (founded in 1622 as a counterweight to the Portuguese Padroado); in the nineteenth century these Carmelites were also engaged in jurisdictional battles with the region's Padroado missionaries.

author of the *Political and General History of the District of Tinnevely*). Caldwell was an Anglican SPG missionary based twenty miles from Vadakkankulam in Idaiyankuti, one of the largest communities of Shanar Protestant converts in Tamilnad. Despite his long-standing association with Shanar converts (and despite the fact that some of the Vadakkankulam Shanars had already forged links with the SPG) Caldwell accepted the Vadakkankulam Vellalas' appeal. In a move which recalled the LMS flirtation of 1807, the Vellalas ceded land to the Protestant SPG and were able to announce to the resident Jesuit in the village that they had received recognition as Anglican 'enquirers'.<sup>39</sup> This meant that they were potential converts with a tentative SPG affiliation. In their negotiations over church rights and honours they could invoke their new-found patron and hold the threat of a mass Anglican conversion or 'defection' over the head of their own long-suffering missionary.

Of course both Protestant and Catholic missionaries often fought back when they felt that such gambits had gone too far in weakening their authority. When such counter-challenges did occur, when a mission came to be identified with one particular contending group in a village conflict or sought to take command of the locality's rites and festivals, then there were outbreaks like the Vadakkankulam Shanars' so-called 'outrages' of the 1860s. This is why these particular clashes in Vadakkankulam combined two distinct purposes. On the one hand, they involved the usual attempt to gain control of the locality's key procession street, and so they can be seen as yet one more ploy in the long-running Vellala-Shanar battle over 'sacred space'. On the other hand, they were attacks on the claims of primacy which were being made by the European priesthood. In effect the Vadakkankulam Shanars were saying that they were not passive members of a flock: the missionary must be their man, their client, a mere ritualist who functioned at their command.

### **Vadakkankulam's new sacred precinct**

In 1872 Vadakkankulam's new Holy Family church was finally completed. Described by one Jesuit chronicler as 'un monstre sublime' (a sublime monster) the building was (and still is) one of the largest

<sup>39</sup> *Mission Field* 10:116 (1865), pp. 146–50; 10:117 (1865), p. 169; Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 249. In 1858 the Anglican SPG had launched an evangelical campaign in southwest Tirunelveli. By 1867 there were said to be 1,800 SPG converts within ten miles of Vadakkankulam, many of them based nearby in Radhapuram. *Mission Field* 11:127 (1866), pp. 145–6; 12:140 (1867) p. 301; 21:250 (1876) p. 295.

Christian churches in south India.<sup>40</sup> The architect, a Jesuit who had once built for the Kaiser, conceived the church as a showpiece for the prestige and power of the Madurai mission, both in relation to its conflicts with rival Christian denominations, and in its confrontations with its own adherents. In the setting of this remote hinterland village the church's massive proportions and neo-Gothic grandeur are positively bizarre. It still serves very well though as the kind of monument which the Jesuits had in mind when they evolved the view of lavish church-building as a sign of active spiritual life in their parishes.

Nevertheless, against all their inclinations and after twenty years of delays and conflicts, the Jesuits had been forced to concede the point which the Vellalas and Shanars had been demanding all along: worshippers were to be segregated by caste during all rites and celebrations in the church. In fact, while the missionaries had hoped all along that they would be able to put an end to Vadakkankulam's protracted honours disputes, the situation had become more contentious than ever. The lines of corporate affiliation and opposition were now rigidified, and both Shanars and Vellalas were still convinced that they needed clear-cut reference points in the church in order to prevent any possible loss of honours. Both groups made it clear that they would block all attempts to open the new church if it did not contain satisfactory boundary markers. In the end they were able to force through a much more elaborate form of demarcation than the one which had operated in the old chapel. Unlike the St Aloysius shrine with its simple wooden railings, the new Holy Family church was built with a massive 20-foot high brick barrier running the full length of the nave from the main door to the communion rail. This was not just a wall dividing the two sections of the church: the barricade contained an inner tunnel which allowed the priest to reach the altar without setting foot on the space occupied by any of his contending communicants. Each section contained its own communion table and a separate entrance through which worshippers entered their particular part of the church. The allocation of space followed the same pattern which prevails in the region's Hindu temples. The right-hand section of any sacred precinct is purer and more prestigious than the left, and so in the new Holy Family church all Christian 'Pillaimar' (and any other recognised sat-sudra converts) were to worship within the ritually

<sup>40</sup> Guchen, *Cinquante ans*, II, pp. 248–50; journal entry 9 Sept. 1910/Box II, 40–1910–122/Gwynn Papers, Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge; P. Suaui, *L'Inde Tamoule* (Toulouse, 1917), p. 71; *Vadavai Mātā Tēvālayam Nūrrandu Vilā Malar* ('Vadakkankulam Holy Mother Church Centenary Souvenir Volume') (Nagercoil, 1972).

superior right-hand section; Shanars and other low-caste Christians occupied the left-hand side.<sup>41</sup>

There was no Christian holy place like this anywhere else in India. It is true that other south Indian churches had adopted segregated seating arrangements during the colonial period. This was in keeping with the move towards a more exclusive sense of caste identity which was one of the main features of Indian society at this time. Even so the Vadakkankulam tunnel-barrier was soon well known as one of the sub-continent's great architectural curiosities. Its significance was a matter of debate, however. In the eyes of most contemporary observers the church's bizarre structure was a product of traditional 'caste prejudice' and the age-old inflexibilities of south Indian society.<sup>42</sup> What was never recognised was that the region's caste system was anything but static and inflexible and that the arrangement had come about as a result of unrest and dislocation dating from relatively recent times.

### **The widening of conflict**

Although they had been forced to accept the brick caste barrier, the Jesuits were still determined to impose their will on the locality in matters of church rites and festival arrangements. After decades of vacillation, the mission decided that their best hope of regaining control over the parish was to return to the old and much-challenged policy of building up the Christian Pillaimar as Vadakkankulam's pre-eminent status group. In June 1872, shortly after the consecration of the new Holy Family church, the Jesuits issued a harshly worded decree proclaiming that the leading Vellala families were to hold all important ceremonial honours in the village, and denying every mark of rank and status which the Shanar dissidents had been demanding for the past seventy years. The declaration stated that only Vellalas were to serve the mass and handle the sacred vessels. They alone had the right to sing Latin and Tamil hymns during mass, and only Vellalas were to carry the capparams and sacred regalia during the Assumption festival.<sup>43</sup>

As before, the Vadakkankulam Shanars were offered a separate festival of St Aloysius with the right to sing Tamil (but not Latin) hymns while the festival was taking place. Shanars would be permitted to carry the ceremonial capparam platforms during this feast, but only in the streets near the old chapel, and only if they provided new processional items at

<sup>41</sup> *Vadarai Mata Televalayam Nurrandu Vila Malar*.

<sup>42</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 252.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 252-3.

their own expense. They were not to touch the main village regalia or take processions along the route which led to the village's main Holy Family church. Furthermore the Shanars would still have to share their portion of the church with Paraiyans and all the other low-caste Christian groups in Vadakkankulam.<sup>44</sup> Thus, if these plans were carried out, the shrine's segregated seating system would establish the sort of hierarchical church structure which the Jesuits had wanted all along. The Vellalas, ritually superior by virtue of the mission's patronage, would be grouped alone on one side, with all the remaining parishioners clumped into an undifferentiated mass on the other.

The Shanars were incensed at all this: at a single stroke they had been denied any token of enhanced ceremonial standing while being bracketed yet again with untouchables and savarna Christians. In August 1872, at the start of the next Assumption festival, a crowd of Shanar villagers set up a blockade outside their entrance to the church. Their aim was to bar Paraiyans and other low-ranking Christians from their section of the building. This would show that they belonged to a caste group which was separate from the local avarna groups, one whose rights and honours were much closer to those of the Christian Vellalas. The blockade thus served as an attempt to redraw the locality's caste boundaries. By challenging the missionaries and the other village caste groups in this way, the Shanars were demonstrating that they had the power to seize control of Vadakkankulam's main sacred precinct, that they could even stop the celebration of the village's main annual festival if they chose.<sup>45</sup>

As the protest got underway, the assembled Shanar, Paraiyan and Vellala worshippers began to stone one another; the resulting outbreak was one of the bloodiest in Vadakkankulam's long history of riots and street battles.<sup>46</sup> From this point on, the region's disaffected Christians began to forge links with villagers of their own caste group in other parts of Tamilnad. This meant that both sides were coming to behave as if they belonged to so-called 'traditional' castes, that is as members of mass corporate interest groups locked in conflict with opposing 'caste rivals'. At first it was the Vadakkankulam Shanars who began to tour the region, seeking out localities in which similar honours disputes were being waged. Appealing to Shanar villagers in these centres, they denounced the Jesuit parish priest who had testified against them in the court case which followed the 1872 festival riot, and they called on the Shanars for

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 233–4.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

support, arguing that a show of solidarity would yield up new rights and honours for them all.<sup>47</sup>

Kallikulam, a village eight miles from Vadakkankulam, was the first locality to offer support to the Vadakkankulam Shanars. The Shanars of Kallikulam were also a mixed group of newly prosperous palmyra cultivators and petty traders. They too had been involved in a battle over caste rank and church honours for many years, and these disaffected villagers leapt at the chance of setting up a united all-Shanar front against the mission. Within three months the Christian Shanars of six embattled villages around Vadakkankulam had joined the campaign. The participants despatched a delegation to describe their collective 'wrongs and sufferings' to the Padroado authorities at Quilon; they also sent petitions to the Carmelite church authorities at Cochin, and finally to the Pope and the King of Portugal.<sup>48</sup>

When nothing came of all these overtures the Vadakkankulam Shanar dissidents took tactical guidance from a Padroado Goan priest based in a nearby Parava village. A new tactic was devised: in their demands for new church honours the Shanar leaders now began to argue that the region's Vellala Catholics were mere parvenus, that they the Shanar were the only true and original Christians in the Tamil hinterland and that the Christian Pillaimar had never had any real right to church office and honours. The antecedents of these Velallas must always remain dubious, the Shanars claimed: they were migrants, outsiders, and their forebears had converted to Christianity long after the conversion of their own Shanar ancestors.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore the Shanars possessed a founder figure of indisputable power and prestige – the early Shanar Christian guru Sandai Nadati. The Sandai tradition had certainly not died out in the southern Tamil country, but it was as part of this new campaign that the stories of her life and miraculous powers now began to be much more widely circulated in the southern Tamil country. In the figure of Sandai Nadati, contending groups of Shanars could point to a lost golden age when there were no Vellalas to exclude them from sacred rights and privileges, and when a member of their caste group had been endowed with the power of sacred Christian preceptorship. Naturally there were differences between this version of the Sandai cult, and the cult traditions which had first taken root in the pre-colonial period. The nineteenth-century Sandai was a cult figure associated with the heightening of exclusive and competitive caste

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 260–4.

<sup>49</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 262–3.

identities, and not with the creation of new political domains as in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>50</sup>

The region's Christian Vellalas were quick to challenge these claims about their status and antecedents. It was to counter the Shanars' charges that they began to compile the family histories which were later transcribed by the Jesuit genealogist Fr. Arpudam. These accounts were intended to show that the Vadakkankulam Vellala lineages came of honourable and ritually superior origins: this is why so much emphasis was placed on claims of descent from high-ranking Hindu temple priests.<sup>51</sup> At the same time the Christian Pillaimar also tried to use the British judicial system to undercut their rivals. Soon after the 1872 riot the leading Vadakkankulam Vellalas lodged a court suit claiming that the streets around the Holy Family church were their own private property and that this gave them the right to bar Shanar processions from these precincts. This was a ploy which was being used by the contesting parties in many other south Indian honours disputes; the Paravas' version of this tactic has already been described.<sup>52</sup>

In 1874 the Vadakkankulam Shanars outraged the Jesuits by making an overture of their own to the Anglican SPG missionaries. This gave the Protestant mission high hopes of adding the local Shanars to their recent haul of Vadakkankulam Vellala 'inquirers' and so, to the fury of the Jesuit parish priest, the SPG opened two new schools in the village.<sup>53</sup> For the next three years the Shanars managed to keep up their pressure on the Jesuits by combining the threat of district-wide Shanar agitation with their other great weapon, the swapping of sectarian affiliations. By this point the Shanars had managed to build up ties to three separate church organisations – the Cochin Carmelites, the Protestant SPG and the Portuguese episcopal hierarchy at Goa – while still continuing to debate the question of local church honours with the Jesuits. By 1877 these tactics had succeeded so well that the Jesuits cancelled all previous allocations of church honours in Vadakkankulam and offered the Shanars their first ever gains in rank and status. For the first time members of the leading Shanar trading families were to carry capparams and flags in the main Assumption festival. The Vellalas would retain their pre-eminence in rituals enacted inside the Holy Family church, but the Shanars were to dominate all rites and ceremonies staged along the outdoor procession route during the festival.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> [Caussanel] 'Some notes about the past of the Tinnevely district' (MS), MMA.

<sup>51</sup> See Arpudam, 'Genealogy', p. 1; Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 262–3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 261–72; 280–6.

The Vadakkankulam Vellalas were horrified by this move. Amid lurid threats against the parish priest and his superiors, a group of Christian Pillaimar invited several Protestant mission workers into the village and announced plans for a mass Anglican conversion among all Vellalas in the region. Then, just as the village seemed set for its worst ever riot, a cholera epidemic swept the region, to be followed by the great south Indian drought and famine of 1877–8. For the next thirteen years the Jesuits banned all large-scale festival celebrations in the village. They said that this was because of the upheaval caused by these natural calamities, but there was also a suggestion that the missionaries now perceived the locality's corporate rituals as being such a threat to public order, and perhaps even to their own prestige and authority, that they were best left in suspension.<sup>55</sup>

During the 1880s, with festivals still in suspension in Vadakkankulam, the Jesuits launched a full-scale conversion campaign in southwestern Tirunelveli. By the end of the decade they were reporting a modest gain of about 600 new Christian adherents in the villages around Vadakkankulam, almost all of them Shanars.<sup>56</sup> As in most cases of Catholic and Protestant 'mass conversion' in the nineteenth century, the missionaries had great difficulty in stabilising these groups of converts: relatively few of them maintained any lasting adhesion to Christianity. The explanation for this is probably the fact that the region's mass conversion movements almost always took place against a background of long-running status and honours disputes. As a result, adherents of this type tended to shift back and forth between any number of different religious affiliations, sometimes maintaining ties to several different missionary groups, and, depending on whether they succeeded in bids for new rights and honours, often dropping all Christian affiliations within a very short time – sometimes after four or five years, often within only a few months. When the Vadakkankulam Shanars began to enlist the region's new converts into their campaigns, these groups of combative and unsettled short-term Christians added yet another element of instability to the locality's contentious social relationships.<sup>57</sup>

In 1890 the mission agreed to the restoration of festivals in Vadakkankulam. A significant upturn in the local economy had taken place after the 1878 famine. There was an expansion in the Ghat trade, and an influx of remittances from migrant plantation workers and petty traders based in

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 280–93.

<sup>56</sup> *Vadavai Mata Tevalayam Nurrandu Vila Malar*, pp. 30–2; Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 293–4.

<sup>57</sup> Report of the Suvesashapuram Mission/Jan. 1839/vol. LMS 62/ICHA.

Ceylon. Many of the region's Shanars made significant gains at this time, and with the return to shared corporate rituals in prospect these families demanded added rights and honours in the locality's church ceremonies. The mission's regional Superior Fr. Verdier showed how far Jesuit thinking had changed when he declared in 1894, 'Since the Shanars are growing numerous and rich and are, under that respect, superior to the Vellalas, it seems to me quite reasonable to give them every satisfaction when it is possible to do so.'<sup>58</sup>

What the Shanars wanted now was access to the ritually superior right-hand side of the nave during all church ceremonies: this would be an even more dramatic erosion of Vellala primacy than their earlier gains in the Assumption festival. In order to justify this demand they recruited the region's new Shanar converts, transporting them in ever larger numbers into the village on Sundays and feast days so as to fill their own half of the church to bursting point. Fresh from confrontations with the holders of pre-eminent shares and honours in their home localities, these imported Shanars entered eagerly into the noisy confrontations which were now taking place again in the village church.<sup>59</sup> The presence of these newcomers also enabled the Vadakkankulam Shanars to argue that they now outnumbered the Vellala communicants very substantially and that it was only reasonable to let them spill over into the high-caste section of the church. They also pointed out that it was their initiative which had brought this flood of new worshippers to the village. They and not the Vellalas were bringing honour to Vadakkankulam and its great church and adding new revenue to the church coffers; these acts showed that the Shanar lineages were now taking the lead in making Vadakkankulam the centre of an active and expansive sacred domain, and so it was they who should hold chief honours in the village church.<sup>60</sup>

The parish priest resisted these demands, but in April 1895 the Vaddakankulam Shanars seized the chance to build up even wider-ranging links with other Shanars in the Tamil country. The claim from now on was that all contending Shanars in the south were part of a great caste 'uplift' movement aimed at social advancement for their community and relief of age-old caste 'disabilities'. This was just the public face of these campaigns. Throughout the south almost every form of inter-group conflict was now couched in the language of reforming social activism, but such confrontations still had their roots in honours and status conflicts of the sort which had become widespread since the early nineteenth

<sup>58</sup> Letter dated 18 Dec. 1894, quoted in Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 300.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

century.<sup>61</sup> The event which gave the Vadakkankulam Shanars the chance to set up this new tactical alliance was one of south India's bloodiest religious clashes, the great riot of 1895 at Kalugumalai in the old poligar domain of Ettaiyapuram. This small town (population 3,800 in 1895) which is located sixty miles north of Vadakkankulam, was the site of an important regional cattle market. It also contains a much revered Subrahmanya temple cut into the base of a great rock which dominates the town like the sacred fortified rock at Trichy. Kalugumalai's mixed population of Tamil- and Telugu-speaking cultivators and traders contained no Christians at all until 1895, although there were many old Catholic mission centres nearby.<sup>62</sup>

For many years before the 1895 riot, the Hindu Shanars and Maravas of Kalugumalai had been involved in a fierce dispute over access to the procession route adjacent to the Kalugumalai temple. Here too the rapid economic gains which had been made by many local Shanars provided the backdrop to these disputes. As David Ludden has shown, many Shanar traders and specialist cultivators made disproportionate gains during the colonial period in the dry Tirunelveli cotton-growing country, while the region's former martial élite, including many Maravas, were much less well equipped to take advantage of the rapid commercialisation of agriculture in the Tamil plains country.<sup>63</sup>

The details of the Kalugumalai conflict were almost identical to those of south India's numerous Christian (and Hindu) honours disputes. In August 1894 after a lengthy court case much like the one involving the Vadakkankulam and Tuticorin church streets, the Kalugumalai Shanar litigants suffered a resounding defeat: an injunction was issued which barred them from taking marriage processions along the disputed procession route. What followed was a classic example of a tactical

<sup>61</sup> See Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnad*, pp. 78–90; and D.A. Washbrook's critique in *MAS* 5:3 (1971), pp. 278–83. On the use of caste and communal slogans to enlist patronage and support from outsiders during religious disputes, see *Mission Field* 1:26 (1856), pp. 195–6; 10:116 (1865), pp. 146–50; 10:117 (1865), p. 169; 11:125 (1866), pp. 101–2.

<sup>62</sup> After the last anti-poligar war (1799–1801) Ettaiyapuram was made into a *zamindari* estate; its Vaduga chiefs were declared hereditary *zamindars* (revenue-paying land-holders). In 1895 the population of Kalugumalai was put at 500 Shanars, 475 Maravas, 750 Vellalas and other *savarna* Hindus (mostly Telugu-speaking *Vadugas*). GO 2451–2/MJP 26–11–1895/IOL; Pate, *Tinnevely*, pp. 379–81; Durairaj, *Directory of Palaiyamkottai*, pp. 40–1; *Family History of the Ettayapuram Zemindari*, (Madras, n.d.: c. 1920), pp. 2–3. Ettaiyapuram town had been the site of a violent 'honours' dispute over rights of access to a prestigious procession route. Report 19 Nov. 1875/volume entitled 'Ettaiyapuram Correspondence' 1872–8/Tirunelveli Collectorate Record Room.

<sup>63</sup> *Hindu newspaper* 17 May 1895; *Madras Mail* 13 April 1895; Pate, *Tinnevely*, p. 126; Ludden, *Peasant History*, pp. 194–5.

'conversion' to Christianity. Over 200 of the Kalugumalai Shanars presented themselves to the nearest Jesuit missionary and proclaimed a new-found faith in Christianity. The priest accepted them as legitimate Christian 'inquirers'. Once they had been recognised as intending converts the group immediately built a Roman Catholic chapel on a prominent location in the town's main temple street.<sup>64</sup>

The aim here was the same as had been the case in 1807 when the Vadakkankulam Shanars built a Protestant chapel in the disputed church street of Vadakkankulam. As soon as their chapel was finished the Kalugumalai Shanars built a pantal enclosure in front of the structure, blocking the route along which the local Maravas were planning to drag Lord Subrahmanya's temple ter (chariot) during the locality's annual utsavam procession. There was no question here of a religious conversion as the term is usually understood. Clearly none of these Shanars had experienced a profound change of faith or any sort of deep spiritual transformation; still less were they opting out of an inequitable Hindu caste order or repudiating their ties to the locality's ceremonial ranking system. On the contrary, once the court case had failed to secure this key sign of rank and status for them the local Shanars declared themselves Christians for no other reason than to gain access to the Hindu procession street. Their pantal was an assertion of primacy and control just like the one built by the Vadakkankulam Vellalas in 1807.<sup>65</sup>

As in Vadakkankulam, the Shanars planned to test their new claims during Kalugumalai's most important corporate religious festival, in this case the Subrahmanya utsavam which was scheduled for April 1895. By now these show-downs were staged in the presence of large crowds drawn in from outside localities. Both the Maravas and the Shanars had brought in sizeable bands of supporters for the event, and as the procession began there was a fierce outbreak of rioting. This was a much more violent clash than any of Vadakkankulam's conflicts: ten people were killed in the Kalugumalai conflict, and the town's Shanar residential quarter was sacked and burned.<sup>66</sup>

The Shanars of Vadakkankulam and other south Tirunelveli villages were greatly inflamed by news of the riot and the criminal charges which were lodged against thirty-eight Kalugumalai Shanars. Vadakkankulam was one of the first localities to which the defendants appealed for money and moral support. Vadakkankulam's Shanar traders sent cash donations and bombarded district officials with telegrams protesting against the trial

<sup>64</sup> *Hindu* 17 May 1895; *Madras Mail* 13 April 1895; Pate, *Tinnevely*, p. 126.

<sup>65</sup> Pate, *ibid.*; GO 2451-2/MJP 26 Oct. 1895/IOL.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

and sentencing of the rioters. In making these gestures, the Vadakkankulam Shanars perceived clear similarities between the Kalugumalai issue and their own church honours disputes. There were no direct material gains to be made here: the Vadakkankulam families had no previous marriage links or commercial ties with the Kalugumalai Shanars. As the Kalugumalai dissidents had been Christians for only nine months, the move cannot be explained as an expression of Christian community and shared Catholic identity of the sort which the missionaries thought they could foster among their converts.<sup>67</sup>

Nor were these campaigns a product of social or economic 'modernisation'. The conflicts over rank and status which had become such a prominent feature of south India's religious life – the many temple entry campaigns, the battles for access to procession streets and so on – have been attributed to a sudden transformation in south Indian society which took place at some crucial point in the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>68</sup> This sudden 'unhinging' of social bonds has been put down to the growth of the market economy, and to the impact of modern communications and the spread of western-style education in the era of British colonial rule. There has also been much emphasis on the egalitarian teachings received from the European missionaries, especially from Protestants of the more radical British evangelical churches. But what these cases show is that there was nothing 'modern' about south India's nineteenth-century honours disputes. Such conflicts had been common in Malabar and the Tamil country for hundreds of years. They became particularly widespread at the end of the eighteenth century and were linked to the heightening of supposedly 'traditional' caste identities and the disintegration of pre-colonial kingdoms and warrior chiefdoms; they did not appear as products of a 'modernising' form of colonial rule. It must be remembered that ritual status had always been negotiable in south Indian society, and no-one involved in conflicts such as the Kalugumalai temple clash or the Vadakkankulam honours disputes had any intention of 'liberating' himself from the supposed constraints and disabilities of the Hindu caste system. In these conflicts religious conversion was simply one more means by which a group could seek to gain new honours within an established and increasingly stratified scheme of rank and precedence. There was thus no sudden leap from 'tradition' to 'modernity', and as far as the 'modernising' Christian missionary and his converts are concerned it should be clear

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*; *Hindu* 17 May 1895; *Madras Mail* 25 May 1895; 28 May 1895; Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 305.

<sup>68</sup> See above, p. 291, note 27.

by now that Christianity was not received in south India as a radical foreign ideology which was somehow working to 'unhinge' a static and hierarchical social order.

By the end of the nineteenth century these agitations were as common among south Indian Christians, Catholic as well as Protestant, as among Hindus. Some of the contending groups were Protestants of long standing, but many more were either Catholics with little or no exposure to Protestant ideology and schooling, or recent converts whose involvement in disputes over temple streets and ritual privileges had long pre-dated their conversion to Christianity. These clashes also had much in common with the celebrated 1924 'temple entry' *satyagraha* (non-violent protest) at Vaikom in Travancore which acquired its fame from the fact that Gandhi chose to intervene in the dispute on behalf of the Ezhava toddy tappers who were demanding access to the Vaikom temple precincts. Although this agitation has always been portrayed as a modern egalitarian campaign for low-caste 'uplift', it too falls into the category of a classic south Indian honours dispute. For at least twenty-five years before the *satyagraha*, the region's Ezhava toddy tappers – Hindus as well as affiliates of the evangelical Anglican CMS – had been involved in riots and clashes over access to the town's high-caste Hindu procession streets. Here too then there had been a long history of conventional status conflict. This is what was still at issue among the locality's contending Ezhavas even though they now found it tactically convenient to latch on to the social uplift message of their new Gandhian sponsors.<sup>69</sup>

The only novelty in all these situations was the fact that by the late nineteenth century, conflicts over rank and status now involved many groups who had once been largely unconcerned with tokens of hierarchical precedence. Otherwise in almost all these cases the basic principles were the same: the participants were seeking to enhance their ritual status and honour, and they all accepted the fundamental notions of hierarchy and ceremonial precedence which underlay the system. Conversion to Christianity merely provided one more set of bargaining counters for these contestants. If a group failed to win new rights and shares in a locality's ranking scheme as Hindus, they could convert to Christianity, re-stage their campaign for new honours, and hope to win on the next round.

<sup>69</sup> Resident to Chief Secretary to Madras Govt. 30 March 1921/GO (Polit.) Madras 198 (Misc.) 8 April 1921/NAI.

### **The Soares connection**

In the years following the great Kalugumalai riot, the Vadakkankulam Shanars co-ordinated their demands for new ceremonial privileges with a wide range of other campaigns being waged by Shanar converts in villages nearby. In 1898, claiming now to speak for the Shanars of ten or twelve localities in southern Tirunelveli and Travancore, the group decided to pursue their campaign by turning to yet another source of outside spiritual authority. This time they did not appeal to a European missionary organisation, but to that celebrated buccaneer churchman Luis Mariano Soares. It has already been seen that the south Indian ecclesiastical hierarchy had had little success in their attempts to discredit Soares and his 'Independent Catholic Church' colleague Alvarez. By the late 1890s the two clerics had gathered in several thousand 'converts', mostly Paravas and other avarna Christians engaged in disputes with their Carmelite and Jesuit missionaries over matters of church discipline and ceremonial precedence.<sup>70</sup>

Like the Kanniyakumari Paravas who linked up with Alvarez in 1895–6, the Christians of the hinterland were able to see the two clerics as sponsors who could help them to defy their missionaries without risking the loss of sacramental and corporate rituals. In addition, the hinterland dissidents who attached themselves to the 'Independent Church' found a special meaning in the tale of the two clerics' break with the official church authorities. In their eyes these were men who had cast off the constraints of institutional religion; it was therefore possible to identify them with the great autonomous Christian gurus of the past, and thus with personalities such as Sandai Nadati who had become a focus for contending Shanar groups in Vadakkankulam and the other embattled south Indian localities.

In this period, when more and more Tamil and Malayali Christians were beginning to enter into short-term attachments to the Independent Church, there were many conflict-prone localities in which the mere threat of sending for Soares and Alvares was enough to force concessions from local priests and missionaries. For the Vadakkankulam Christians threats were not enough. In 1898, after a series of outbreaks in which the Vadakkankulam Shanars and Vellalas repeatedly came to blows inside the Holy Family church, a delegation of Shanars from the region travelled to Colombo to fetch Soares. Several hundred Shanars from Vadakkankulam, Kallikulam and other localities repudiated their ties with the Jesuits, accepted the sacraments from Soares, and built

<sup>70</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', p. 310; Agur, *Church History*, pp. 404–9.

strategically placed new chapels in Vadakkankulam and the other embattled villages.<sup>71</sup>

Two years later the Collector ordered the demolition of Soares's chapel in Vadakkankulam: like the Kalugumalai 'convert' chapel, or the rival neophyte Protestant chapels in Vadakkankulam, the building had become the focus for yet another series of riots. The Vadakkankulam Vellalas were encouraged by this victory, and so they launched a campaign of their own to build up broadly-based regional links with their so-called caste fellows. They sent out passionately worded appeals to their fellow 'Pillaimar' in localities all over Tamilnad, concentrating particularly on prominent Vellalas – Hindus as well as Christians – with posts as Collectorate officials, *vakils* (pleaders), teachers and medical workers.<sup>72</sup> They also found a champion with many of the same qualities as the rogue clerics Alvarez and Soares. This figure, a Catholic Nanjenand Vellala named Gregory Susai Pillai, was another itinerant orator and publicist who had already had a successful career helping to mount protests against Carmelite church authority in the Mukkuva and Parava communities of south Travancore. By about 1905 Gregory began to make regular trips to Vadakkankulam. Under his tutelage the Vadakkankulam Vellalas began to adopt many of the tactics used by the Shanars. They too petitioned the Collector, the Madras Government and finally the Holy See with complaints against the Jesuits, claiming to represent the whole 'Tamul Vellalar nation' whose 'ancient rights' and 'nobility' were being 'stained' by the unprincipled Jesuits and Shanars of south India.<sup>73</sup> Obviously members of the huge and amorphous Vellala status category had even less basis than the Shanars for an appeal of this kind, and they never gained mass tactical support to the same extent as the Shanar dissidents. Even so it is still striking that this group too chose to employ the language of ethnic and caste solidarity: this was becoming a universal idiom for social conflict in south India.

In 1910 a new Jesuit bishop was appointed to the Madurai see; like earlier new-broom Catholic missionaries he decided to 'purify' unacceptable forms of behaviour among the region's Catholics. Of all the Jesuits' embattled parishes, Vadakkankulam was judged to be the most flagrant centre of indiscipline in the whole of south India, and the mission ruled that the church's now-notorious brick caste barrier must immediately be torn down.<sup>74</sup> To the Vellalas of Vadakkankulam this represented the final defeat in their battle to maintain ceremonial

<sup>71</sup> Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 310–13.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

precedence in the locality. For the first time in the history of church honours disputes in Vadakkankulam, a substantial number of Vellala families renounced their Christian affiliation altogether. These dissidents signified their new Hindu identity by carrying out domestic death rites imitated from the customs of the region's ritually superior Hindu Saiva Vellalas. They also made tentative efforts to find a Brahman pujari to preside at marriages and other key rituals.<sup>75</sup>

This Hindu 'conversion' lasted for only a few months, possibly because Hindu Vellalas in nearby villages were unwilling to establish ritual and social connections with them and refused to accord clean-caste *sat-sudra* rank to the Vadakkankulam Pillaimar. A more significant change of affiliation occurred when a larger body of Vadakkankulam Vellalas decided that they too would have to withdraw from Catholic religious life once they lost their separate and privileged position in the Holy Family church. In 1910 these families sent representatives to one of south India's largest Protestant proselytising centres, the much-missionised town of Nagercoil in south Travancore. Here the group established contacts with members of another of the region's fiercely expansive European missionary organisations, the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran Church. This group – whose missionaries were American Christian fundamentalists of German descent – had established a mission among the untouchable south Travancore Paraiyans in 1907, and its members soon found themselves providing support and endorsement for local Christians engaged in long-standing honours disputes.<sup>76</sup> Most of its Paraiyan followers were former affiliates of the London Missionary Society who had been battling for tokens of ceremonial precedence against the London Mission's many Shanar adherents. (During the 1890s the Salvation Army also made hundreds of converts among this same population of disaffected former LMS Paraiyans: this too was part of the same fiercely-fought honours dispute with local Shanars.) With the help of Gregory Pillai's contacts in south Travancore, the Vellala dissidents induced the Missouri Lutherans to build a chapel for them in Vadakkankulam. As of 1977, several Vadakkankulam Vellalas were still affiliates of the Missouri Lutheran church.<sup>77</sup>

After five years of unrest and controversy the Jesuits made a major concession to the Vellalas. In order to persuade at least some 'defectors' to return to the church, the Jesuits cancelled the ruling which would have forced Vellala worshippers to sit in close proximity to Shanars and

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> H.M. Zorn, 'Relations between the Missouri Lutherans and the London Missionary Society', *ICHR* 1:2 (1967), pp. 133–43.

<sup>77</sup> Interviews, Vadakkankulam, Aug. 1977.

other low-caste Christians during mass, and they were granted a separate though smaller seating area of their own which fell within their old enclosure on the right-hand side of the nave.<sup>78</sup> Although most of the locality's Vellalas did return to take up these much-reduced church honours, there was no end to conflict in the village. In the 1940s a large group of Shanars tried to seize the Vellalas' remaining marks of precedence by invading the Vellala seating area. When the mission tried to impose sanctions on this group, a Hindu Nadar trader who had recently settled in the village offered to finance the construction of the village's first large Hindu temple. About fifty Shanar families renounced their Christian identity in a mass *suddhi* or purification ceremony and began to sponsor lavish festivals enacted in the new Siva temple.<sup>79</sup>

Today large Assumption festivals are still celebrated in the village, attracting hundreds of Tamil Christians who come to watch the dragging of the large church ter, and to venerate the Devasakayam Pillai relics. Prosperous Shanar (now known as Nadar) traders and cultivators predominate among the festival donors, but a number of Vellala parishioners hold shares in the festival as well. While the Siva temple continues to receive large endowments and offerings from local Shanars, ritual relations seem finally to have reached a state of equilibrium in Vadakkankulam. There appears, at least for the present, to be an acceptable allocation of honours and festival shares among the remaining Christian parishioners, and at the same time the Lutheran chapel and the Siva *kōvil* provide effective outlets whenever attempts are made to reconstitute the local ranking scheme.

<sup>78</sup> Interviews, Vadakkankulam; Caussanel, 'Historical notes', pp. 319–22.

<sup>79</sup> The term *suddhi* was used for 'reconversion' rituals devised by the Hindu revivalist Arya Samaj society from the late nineteenth century. K. W. Jones, *Arya Dharm. Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Punjab* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 129–35, 205–10.

## *Conclusion*

What are the conclusions to be drawn from this study of south Indian religion, of 'convert' groups and their relationships with the wider society? First, religion cannot be studied in isolation if we are to achieve any useful understanding of south Asian society and its changing cultural traditions. Throughout India the domains of religion and politics have been inextricably intertwined. Royal subjects have readily re-identified themselves as disciples and worshippers of the warrior and king turned saint, tutelary or power divinity. For all subjects and worshippers, royal power and the forces of the supernatural formed part of the same continuum of accessible but awesome power and energy. It follows then that south India's political history, that is both the development of indigenous states and kingdoms and the expansion of European colonial power, can be properly explored only by relating the development of shrines, divinities and cult traditions to the story of new regimes and ruling lineages.

It was seen here that the region's most successful regimes, those which achieved some measure of legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of their subjects, were those which used techniques of conspicuous piety and patronage to map their new domains onto an expanding sacred landscape of shrines, pilgrimage places and other repositories of sacred power and energy. Such strategies were pursued by would-be rulers such as the Tamil and Telugu poligars, the Malayali rajas of Travancore, the 'rebel commandant' Yusuf Khan and the professedly 'Islamic' nawabs of Arcot. For all these aspiring dynasts formal boundaries of sect and community were of little importance compared to the universal recognition of the power – the *sakti* or *barakat* – which resided in the sacred sites which they supported. Furthermore, through acts such as the sponsorship of the Mylapore St Thomas shrine and the cult of Our Lady of Snows, such techniques of patronage and assimilation were also followed by the region's European colonial authorities, even when these outsiders did not fully recognise the implications of their activities.

Conventional distinctions between 'popular' and 'scriptural' forms of religion had little relevance here. In our period 'folk' religion did not succumb to formal doctrines and high religion. Nor was south India a

bastion of 'Hindu' orthodoxy. What still mattered most were forms of worship which confronted the power of fierce blood-taking goddesses and other divine bearers of healing and destruction. The combination of evolving cults, observances and ritual traditions which we now describe as 'Hinduism' is still widely thought of as a universal set of norms rooted in concepts of Brahmanical purity and puranic scripturalism. In fact, outside a few river-valley centres of Brahman-style worship, this form of 'Hinduism' is a phenomenon of relatively recent historical formation. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the religion which is now called Hinduism developed as a complex but historically intelligible interplay of 'pure' Saivite and Vaishnavite worship with the cults and rituals of the supposedly 'impure' or 'demonic' power divinities. The same can be said about the social and ritual relationships which we now call caste. The so-called caste 'system' is far from being a timeless 'ethnographic fact' of Indian society. Caste too is historically dynamic; across much of south India, caste identities came to acquire the features which we associate with 'traditional' rank and hierarchy through the collapse of indigenous warrior regimes and the transition to European colonial rule.

This brings us to the role of the so-called 'conversion' religions in south India, and here too there is room for new thinking. Once dismissed as alien or marginal implants of European colonial rule, the manifestations of Islam and Christianity which took root in south India should now be seen as fully 'Indian' religious systems. Their underlying principles of worship and social organisation derived from a complex and dynamic process of assimilation and cross-fertilization. New doctrines, texts and cult personalities were introduced by a variety of Indian, west Asian and European teachers and churchmen, but over time these were taken over and transformed by their recipients. Even in the period of direct British rule, which some have seen as a time of 'revival' and of a turning towards formal or scriptural religion, the most forceful of the self-styled reformers and purifiers had an impact on the society which was not at all what they had intended. This applied to the 'reforming' nineteenth-century Jesuits as well as the purist Naqsh-bandiya Sufis such as Rahmatullah of Nellore. They may have planned to 'purge' and standardise indigenous religion, but the would-be converters were themselves 'converted'; they were made over into tutelaries and cult saints so as to fit in with south India's existing forms of worship.

Thus, though there was much which separated the religious traditions of those who came to identify themselves as Christian and Muslim 'converts', they also had much in common. The most important of these shared features was a focus on the power of supernaturally endowed

tutelaries and cult divinities, many of whom were conceived as warrior kings and heroes. The motifs of blood sacrifice and severed heads which characterised most south Indian worship were rapidly transformed into expressions of Muslim and Christian martyrdom. This involved much more than superficial borrowings or 'accretions' from local pre-'conversion' religions. The sharing of such all-pervading themes and principles of worship transcended divisions of community or confessional attachment, and it provided a powerful focus for the many 'convert' populations who began to form into cohesive caste groups contending over tokens of ritual 'honour' and precedence.

### **The historical origins of communalism**

This book has emphasised the role of saints, power divinities and networks of cult devotion in the three major religious traditions of south India. It has found remarkable correspondences between Muslim pirs, Christian saints and martyrs and the gurus and supernatural warriors of south Indian Hinduism. Over two centuries we have seen how new social groups formed and cohered around these figures of power in the Tamil and Malayali sacred landscape. Petty kings and empire builders, both Indian and European, sought to draw authority and legitimacy from them. As the pre-colonial kingdoms became larger and more sophisticated, some of these new groups took on the more defined features of castes or corporations. However, the descendants of the caste groups who took shape around the region's eclectic cult figures came to be increasingly embroiled in savage conflicts. South India is now a place of increasing tension and upheaval. The region's conflicts have certainly not reached the level of murderous violence which has become commonplace in the Punjab and in much of the Hindi-speaking north, and in cities such as Bombay and Ahmedabad. Even so, there are now large areas of Tamilnadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh which seem to be experiencing something akin to the politicisation of religious, communal and linguistic identities which occurred in many parts of north India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What are the sources of this tension, and how far was it prefigured in the period covered by this book? In Kerala, and in major Muslim population centres such as Hyderabad, employment opportunities in the oil-producing countries are now contracting. Declining remittances and the return of large numbers of expatriate workers from the Gulf have been a source of severe social dislocation. This has been especially marked in localities such as Hyderabad where the resulting economic divisions have been matched by a 'communal' divide between embattled

Hindu peasant groups and a declining urban Muslim gentry.<sup>1</sup> Similarly in southern Tamilnadu, the recent influx of refugee Tamils from Sri Lanka, and the region's increasing involvement in the military struggle being waged with much local support against the Sri Lankan government, has given rise to considerable unrest, especially in southern coastal districts.

The sources of the Sri Lankan conflict are usually discussed in terms of heightened linguistic and ethnic identities. In this sense its origins may be comparable to the forces which led to the formation of regional political parties such as Tamilnadu's DMK, or the more recent rise of the Telugu Desam party of Andhra Pradesh with its glorification of the Telugu religious and literary heritage. There may also be a comparison with the campaigns of militant 'nativism' which have provoked riotous attacks on immigrant Tamils residing in Bangalore and other localities in Karnataka state.

Sri Lanka's so-called communal tensions have been associated with movements of heightened or 'politicised' religious identity. To some, the island's conflict is a confrontation between Sinhalese Buddhists and Saivite Hindu Tamils; the latter are seen to have encroached on a sacred terrain which takes its identity from the island's network of *theravada* Buddhist shrines and holy places.<sup>2</sup> The language of aggressive 'communalism' has also begun to appear in south India's political discourse. This was apparent in the bitter controversy over a small group of Harijans in the Tamil village of Minakshipuram who are reported to have made a mass conversion to Islam in 1982. The circumstances of this move were greatly obscured by the sensational reporting which surrounded the case. Local and even national politicians used the case to make charges about the subversive 'foreign hand' which is forever seeking to destabilise Indian society; there were cries of 'religion in danger', and warnings about the relentless tide of 'Islamisation' which was threatening to unseat Hinduism as the 'true' religion of post-Independence India. These fears drew added force from the activities of small but highly voluble groups of fundamentalist Muslim preachers and students (some Indian, some from the Arab countries) who have taken to touring Muslim localities in Kerala and Tamilnadu, and have provoked conflicts over issues of religious 'purity' and practice in many areas.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is noted in D.A. Swallow, 'Woman weavers in Trivandrum, Kerala - work and family', paper delivered to University of Cambridge Centre of South Asian Studies seminar, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> This is in spite of the fact that many Sinhalese and Tamils are actually Christian or Muslim converts.

<sup>3</sup> I encountered some of these 'purists' in Kayalpatanam in 1980; see also Dale and Menon, 'Nerccas', p. 538, note 32.

Hindu–Muslim conflict is still relatively rare in south India, although there have been violent outbreaks in a number of Keralan towns in recent years; many coastal regions in Tamilnadu are known for the ferocity of their confrontations between Christian Parava fishermen and local Hindu (and Christian) Shanar (or Nadar) palmyra cultivators.<sup>4</sup>

What were the historical developments that helped to transform this world of overlapping cult saints and ‘syncretic’ religion into a domain of growing ethnic and communal violence? Were community or ‘communalism’ in this form coming into existence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? If so, what were the forces which helped to create them? Here the record is ambiguous. This study has sought to show that religious affiliation and ‘conversion’ have always been matters of internal competition within the different social and religious groups of Tamilnad and Kerala. Leaving aside the charisma of St Francis Xavier and the other early Roman Catholic missionaries, it seems clear that Parava conversion was not so much an attempt to avoid caste disabilities as an attempt by some members of the region’s maritime population to differentiate themselves from Hindu and Muslim fishing people, to find themselves patrons amongst European or Indian powers, and above all to create for themselves a ritual arena which allowed them to raise their ritual status by adopting a Christian ‘caste lifestyle’. By changing their confessional attachment the Paravas actually succeeded in improving their position within the region’s wider scheme of caste rank and ‘honour’. They even preserved many aspects of their pre-Christian religious life through to the twentieth century, in spite of the protests of the missionaries and their European church authorities.

Similarly the development of Christian cults in the Tamil hinterland turned on competition between local poligar lineages on the one hand, and competition over the scarce economic resources of these dry plainlands on the other. The heroic saint cults of the Syrian Christians and the group’s adherence to a caste lifestyle emphasising Nayar and Brahman-style ritual observances consolidated their relationship with the dominant high-caste warrior populations of the Malabar coast. Even amongst Muslims, or the Kallars and other ‘Hindu’ groups who adopted Muslim figures of power as their tutelary divinities, support for these new Muslim cult traditions formed the basis of claims for status which put them on a par with the votaries of the great Hindu temples. Muslims who came to be associated with some of the great dargahs or saint-cult

<sup>4</sup> Hindu and Christian maritime groups from Kanniyakumari and southern Kerala have also been fighting over the lucrative pilgrimage and sightseeing traffic to the offshore shrine complex known as the Vivekanada Rock.

shrines in south India exchanged ritual honours with Brahmanical Hindu temple centres. There were also powerful Kallar lineages who competed for the honour of presiding over the flag hoisting ceremony at the Muslim Kat Bava shrine in Pudukkottai.

To this extent, conversion might be thought of as the prosecution of claims to higher status by other and more militant means. Groups of cultivators, fishermen or traders became 'Muslim' or 'Christian', or even in a sense 'Hindu', in order to elevate their standing within a locally recognised scheme of ceremonial rank and precedence. The time-honoured tendency to reproach Christian or Muslim converts for their adherence to the 'superstitions' of their previous religious affiliation is therefore wholly misconceived. So too is the idea that the only or even the major motive force behind conversion was to dissolve the skein of Hindu ritual relations in the interests of 'modernity', egalitarianism or social 'progress'.

Yet although virtually all converts maintained powerful and dynamic relationships with other communities and with other traditions of religious practice in the society around them, even before the onset of direct European rule there were developments which tended to create divisions between individual confessional identities and social groupings. In particular many of the most mobile and successful sub-groups within these convert societies sought to assert their special status by adopting traditions which implied some rejection of the religious practices of the wider society. This can be seen for example in the traditions of opulent 'kingly' piety which became characteristic of the Parava caste headmen and other members of the group's mejaikarar trading élite. Although the group's great church festivals were closely linked to the region's Hindu utsavams (temple festivals) the cults of Our Lady of Snows and the other great Parava tutelaries had still originated as creations of the same foreign missionaries who had demanded their allegiance to the Portuguese Crown. Furthermore these 'kingly' worshippers were at least partially dependent upon the availability of foreign priests to dispense the sacraments. Similarly for the Syrian Christians, privileged association with the cult shrine of St Thomas at Mylapore helped to preserve the group's ritual superiority, but it also linked the group to a holy place which had been rebuilt and popularised as an exercise in colonial patronage and mission-building by the Portuguese Padroado.

Amongst south Indian Muslims too, the élite maraikkayar traders in Kayalpatanam and some of the region's other leading coastal localities created a self-consciously 'Islamic' world for themselves by adopting middle eastern marriage customs, Tamil Arabic literary culture and 'purist' practices such the seclusion of women. But even in the case of

such advanced and prosperous communities, these signs of separation from the surrounding society were incomplete and ambiguous. The same élite Paravas who had identified themselves with royal 'Padroado' religion also adopted a modified form of Brahmanical vegetarianism, and maintained a fictive marriage system which ran contrary to orthodox Roman Catholic rules of 'consanguinity'. So too the self-consciously 'Islamic' maraikkayar Muslims evolved various strategies which allowed them to maintain close ties with lower-ranking Tamil Labbais, that is to say with groups whose religious life was tightly bound up with the shrines, divinities and observances of their Hindu neighbours.

At no time in the immediate pre-colonial period was there a clear and unambiguous process at work by which boundaries between different south Indian groups or 'communities' were being irrevocably hardened. Certainly competition for status became more general, more lavish and more eclectic. All the same, significant differences in identity did exist, and these were widened by the impact of colonial rule and the changing political economy which went with it. The very fact that legends of saints and goddesses portrayed these figures as beings in opposition to one another, even within the same ritual and narrative framework, meant that there was the possibility for competitive clashes over status to be transformed into more permanent social divisions. (This is not to say that there were self-contained communities or 'communal' identities at this time, but that legends of sacred competition once taken out of context could be used as rallying cries in the cause of political or other forms of secular competition.)

This study has argued that the impact of colonial rule hastened the creation of social groupings of the sort which have now come to be thought of as 'traditional' south Asian caste groups and religious identities. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ethnographers and administrators propagated the image of India as a *mêlée* of fractious and conflict-ridden social groupings. This, though, was a product not so much of direct colonial policy as of the very structure of the East India Company's state. Its system of rule had severed the ritual relationships and schemes of 'honour' and incorporation which had integrated the earlier kingdoms: the result was the emergence of more rigid and exclusive 'communal' boundaries.

South India had no zealot rulers like Aurangzeb. It is true that Martanda Varma wished to create a dharmic Hindu kingdom, and that some poligars dallied with the idea of turning their chiefdoms into Christian kingdoms. Even so, the widening of Hindu ritual *thèmes* to encompass whole kingdoms (as in the case of Travancore and Cochin) never implied the exclusion or down-grading of peoples who were not

formally identified as Hindus. Indeed the ostensibly Hindu kingdom of Travancore saw the St Thomas Christians achieve their closest 'integration' within the state as soldiers, traders and sircar office-holders, and royal honours continued to flow to them, to Jews, and even under some circumstances to Mappila and Pathan Muslim warriors. Practically the only examples of severe conflict between groups defined in terms of their religious identity were associated with Tipu Sultan of Mysore, who attacked Nayers and some Syrian Christians in Malabar. But even Tipu, who used Islamic holy war as a technique of statecraft outside the confines of his home dominions, was careful to foster close ritual and political relations with Hindus and even Christians within his own domain, providing that these groups posed no threat to his authority.

The trend of the pre-colonial states may have been to build up the corporate identities of important groups of subjects by integrating them through systems of royal 'honours' and the creation of monopolies. But it was rare for this to provoke open conflict between such groups. By breaking down these Hindu- and Muslim-ruled kingdoms, colonial political culture did create the conditions for militant conflict between groups such as the Syrians and their Hindu neighbours, or the Tamil Shanars and Vellalas of the Tamil hinterland.

The disruption of these relationships between Hindus and Christians in Kerala took place in several different ways. First, there were the effects of forced demilitarisation within the Travancore and Cochin kingdoms. The disbanding of the two Keralan armies destroyed institutions like the *kalari* gymnasias within which high-caste Hindus, Christians and even Muslims had competed for status and honours, but had also forged links between themselves which were reflected in the rituals of the two states. Similarly the economic changes which affected the Keralan region tended to create sharper cleavages between these groups. During the eighteenth century many St Thomas Christians had been brought closer to the Hindu court of Travancore through their management of state trading monopolies, particularly the pepper monopoly which had been closely tied to the expansion of political control over the different segments of Martanda Varma's kingdom, and over its ritual life. In the first half of the nineteenth century the imposition of new land revenue settlements and the introduction of other measures which were supposed to 'rationalise' the states' administrations and increase the flow of subsidy payments to the East India Company also tended to pit Christian against Hindu (and for that matter Mappila Muslim against both Hindu and Christian).<sup>5</sup> At the same time the states' militantly

<sup>5</sup> The complexities of land tenures and revenue collection on the Malabar coast are discussed in Extract Minutes BOR 5 Jan. 1818/217/TCR 3575/TNA.

evangelical Resident Col. Munro and his allies in the Church Missionary Society pursued policies of advocacy and religious 'reform' on behalf of the St Thomas Christians. These campaigns, which took an even more radical form through the activities of the next generation of CMS evangelists, exacerbated existing conflicts within the Syrian population; delicate ritual ties with local Hindus began to break down, and continuous conflict became the norm where there had once been a fair measure of accommodation. In this sense it can be argued that colonial rule created the Syrian Christians as a 'community'.

Similar developments tended to harden boundaries between Hindus and Muslims in Tamilnad. The military warrior culture of the pre-colonial period had proved a fertile field in which syncretic religious practice and even 'conversion' could flourish. Kallar and Marava warriors were associated with Muslim soldiers and their pir preceptors within this broad military culture. After the British had put down the poligars and the Vellore mutineers, and had reduced the Arcot kingdom to the status of a dependent client regime, the region's armies lost their capacity to unite and integrate. Also, as in other parts of India, the tendency of the colonial administration to see religious categories as the basis of its political control, and more particularly, to identify those religious categories with the 'highest' and most textual aspects of religious practice, had the effect of ossifying relations both between and within religious groupings.

More important, however, was the tendency of the British to create conditions within which lesser chiefs' claims to higher ritual status could be prosecuted with much greater vehemence and consistency. It was shortly after the reduction of the nawabi by the British that the Tondaiman raja of Pudukkottai declared himself unwilling to provide funds and support for Muslim shrines and festivals within his domain, as he had done previously.<sup>6</sup> The administration's desire for stability and the relatively large incomes of the early nineteenth-century 'protected' Hindu rulers resulted in a surge of Brahman immigration into kingdoms such as Tanjore, Ramnad and Pudukkotai, with an inevitable emphasis on more exclusive and transcendent aspects of religious practice.<sup>7</sup>

However, it is too simplistic to assume that the only dynamic force in this situation was colonial rule itself. The point is perhaps that with all these changes in south India's political economy, both before and after 1800, competition between social groups came more and more to rely upon the exclusion of competitors for scarce resources and scarce

<sup>6</sup> Radhakrishna Aiyar, *History of Pudukkottai*, I, pp. 301–2.

<sup>7</sup> Price, 'Resources and rule'; Dirks, *Hollow Crown*, pp. 112, 122–3.

ceremonial 'honours'. As a result, the tendency of loosely linked social groups to be transformed into increasingly exclusive communities was intensified. For instance it was partly to establish relationships of superior rank and authority over low-caste labouring groups that those Syrians who had been increasingly alienated from their Hindu neighbours also took to mass 'conversions' amongst the region's low-caste and untouchable Ezhavas, Pulayas and Cherumas. Similarly fierce local 'honours' disputes involving hinterland Christian groups gained added force from the growth of population and from the economic growth associated with the expansion of cash cropping and the rise of the overland Ghat trade between southern Tamilnad and the Malabar coast. Thus the clashes between Vadakkankulam's Christian Shanars and 'Pillaimar' over ritual honours in the local church had roots in the pre-colonial period, but these were sharpened by rapid economic change and by the social conflicts which it engendered.

Even the development of more exclusive Muslim traditions in the south can be ascribed in part to similar internal competition and economic pressures. As the coastal maraikkayar communities became more divorced from production and more dependent upon tight-knit international credit networks, they too began to emphasise their Arabic and Islamic orientations with increasing fervour. At the other end of the spectrum, when artisan groups like the weavers of Melapalaiyam found themselves under pressure, they tended to take up themes of austere Islamic revival (called 'Wahhabism' by the British) like many of the weavers of north India.

However, it is still important to emphasise continuing links of ritual and belief between all these religious groupings or 'communities', even into the late nineteenth to twentieth centuries. Rather than the simple growth of 'orthodox' Christian, Muslim or even Hindu practice, the picture is one of broadening within all these faiths, and at both the 'high' and the more 'popular' ends of the religious spectrum. Thus the cults of potent local pirs such as Nathar Wali and Shahul Hamid of Nagore built up increasingly wide-ranging networks of ritual and pilgrimage and even set down roots outside India. This growth occurred at just the time when north Indian and Deccani 'reformers' and purifiers were introducing their formalised systems of Islamic teaching to the south. Both of these saints, whose origins were certainly 'popular' and at a distance from the learned world, continued to be praised with themes deriving as much from south Indian Vaishnavism and Saivite Hinduism as from conventional Sufi thought. In much the same way, Christian cults and millenarian movements both in the Tamil hinterland and in coastal Kerala and Tamilnad preserved strong echoes of bhakti millenarianism even when they came under the umbrella of an alien religious establishment

as that of the Salvation Army or the Plymouth Brethren. And as late as the 1890s and 1900s, Muslims in localities such as Pulicat and Kallidaikuricci engaged in conflicts over status and ceremonial precedence which had striking parallels to the so-called right-hand/left-hand disputes which continued to erupt in Tamil Hindu society through to the 1820s and beyond. They also had much in common with the disputes over temple entry and other matters of ritual precedence and 'honour' which still persist today.<sup>8</sup>

In a sense the most striking indication that 'high' religion never acquired a dominance over the autonomy of local belief and worship in the south was provided by the history of religious practice in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To some extent Brahmans were always outsiders in Tamil and Malayali society as became clear with the growth of political non-Brahmanism in the early twentieth-century. Christian worship was always eclectic and distinctively south Indian; one sign of this is the fact that for all the passion with which rival Protestant groups had clashed across the boundaries of the various Christian confessional divisions, the south was the first Indian region to abandon these separations with the creation of the Church of South India. Even within present-day Muslim society in south India, the more tolerant and syncretic worship associated with Sufism and the veneration of miracle-working cult pirs has had a continuous appeal and has by no means been put onto the defensive by the growth of externally inspired Muslim 'fundamentalism' in recent years.

Finally, therefore, we are confronted by a paradox which has been evident in many of the historical situations studied in this volume. Over long periods of time, there has been a tendency for groups and corporations to confront one another with growing hostility. At the same time, many of these links of syncretic religious practice or overlapping religious beliefs have persisted or even been re-invented. In the consciousness of many south Indians, Yusuf Khan still presides from his royal seat at Madurai, St Francis and St Thomas still flame in majesty as divine healers and disease-bringers, and Hindus, Muslims and Christians still mingle at the great cult festivals of Tuticorin, Nagore and Velankanni. What will determine whether these communal boundaries become increasingly rigid and contentious? The answer must lie with the moves made by India's twentieth-century 'little kings', the civil servants, judges and politicians for whom issues of religious identity and 'communalism' present ever more intractable problems.

<sup>8</sup> In the long-running Kallidaikuricci 'honours disputes', Tirunelveli Labbais fought for the right to take ceremonial palanquins, drums, flags, shields and other regalia into a local dargah. See above, note 35, p. 90. There are vivid accounts of comparable right-hand/left-hand conflicts amongst south Indian Hindus in e.g. BOR 168/20 June 1796/2/pp. 5856-8 and BOR 161/14 July 1796/22/pp. 7028-62/TNA.

## SELECT GLOSSARY

<i>adappan</i>	caste notable, title used by Parava fishing and trading people (q.v.)
<i>alim</i> (pl. <i>ulama</i> )	expert in Islamic law
<i>amman</i>	south Indian goddess
<i>avarna</i>	Sanskrit term for persons of unclean or ritually polluting caste standing (see <i>savarna</i> )
<i>barakat</i>	miraculous power conferred on Muslim saints and their shrines
<i>bhakti</i>	devotional theistic Hinduism
<i>Brahman</i>	the priestly order in classical Indian sociology
<i>cattam</i> ( <i>cāttam</i> )	cult festival honouring the saints and deceased bishops of the Keralan St Thomas Christians
<i>dewan</i> ( <i>diwan</i> )	chief revenue official
<i>dargāh</i>	Muslim saint's tomb shrine
<i>dharma</i>	religion, moral order, code for conduct
<i>inām</i>	grant of land for service
Jacobite	term used for Keralan St Thomas Christians under the authority of the west Asian Monophysite Patriarchs
<i>jajmāni</i>	system of ritualised patron-client or <i>jajman-kamin</i> (q.v.) redistribution within the caste system
<i>jāti</i>	kind, type, used for the endogamous corporate groups which form the basic units of Indian caste
<i>jāti talaivan</i>	caste headman
<i>kaḷari</i>	Keralan martial training centre
<i>kamārakkārar</i>	ritually inferior sub-division of the Parava caste group (q.v.)
<i>kamin</i>	a recipient of ritualised patronage within a system of <i>jajmāni</i> redistribution (q.v.)
<i>kānikkai</i>	fee, tax
<i>kanturi</i>	Muslim festival commemorating the death of a cult saint or <i>pīr</i> (q.v.)
<i>katanar</i> ( <i>kaṭṭanar</i> )	St Thomas Christian priest
<i>khānaqāh</i>	hospice or teaching foundation of a <i>Sūfī</i> (q.v.)
Kshatriya	the royal or warrior order in classical Indian sociology
Labbais	Tamil Muslims, usually used of non-élite fishing and labouring people
maraiikkāyar	élite Tamil Muslim trading people

<i>mathnawi</i>	a Persian verse form
<i>mējaikārar</i>	ritually superior sub-division of the Parava caste group (q.v.)
<i>metran</i>	metropolitan, chief prelate of the Keralan St Thomas Christians
<i>moupan</i> (Tam. <i>mūppan</i> )	Tamil caste notable
<i>Murai</i>	Tamil marriage system in which preferred partner is father's sister's daughter
<i>nāyaka</i>	warrior 'viceroys' under Vijayanagar rule (q.v.); later founders of independent south Indian kingdoms
<i>pālaiyam</i>	chiefdom ruled by a poligar (q.v.)
<i>pañikkar</i>	chief martial preceptor of a <i>kaḷari</i> gymnasium (q.v.)
<i>pantal</i>	thatched ceremonial canopy
<i>Parava</i>	Roman Catholic Tamil maritime caste
<i>pattangatti</i>	Tamil caste notable
<i>pāttavan</i>	(from Tam. <i>pātta</i> , cut) term used for deified south Indian heroes and those deified after being 'cut off', i.e. dying by violence or in an impure state
<i>pīr</i>	Muslim cult saint (see <i>Sūfī</i> )
<i>poligar</i>	(Tam. <i>pālaiyakkārar</i> ) south Indian warrior chief
<i>pravrattikkar</i>	Keralan village officer
<i>sakti</i>	power, especially the activated supernatural energy possessed by Hindu goddesses
<i>sanad</i>	official grant or proclamation
<i>sat-sudra</i>	non-Brahman 'clean caste'
<i>savarna</i>	Sanskrit term used to designate caste Hindus
<i>shaikh</i>	honorific title for Muslim tribal chiefs and religious leaders, especially Sufi mystical preceptors
<i>sittātti</i>	title for caste notables, used by Tamil Paravas (q.v.)
<i>stalapurana</i>	account of a Hindu temple's powers, myths and origin
<i>Sudra</i>	the labouring order in classical Hindu sociology
<i>Sūfī</i>	an adept in the disciplines of Muslim devotional mysticism (Sufism)
<i>tēr</i>	ceremonial chariot
<i>ulama</i>	See <i>alim</i>
<i>utsavam</i>	(Tam. <i>ur̥savam</i> ) Hindu temple festival
<i>Vaishya</i>	the merchant order in classical Hindu sociology
<i>varna</i>	one of the four orders of mankind in classical Hindu sociology
<i>Vijayanagar</i>	south Indian warrior kingdom founded in the southern Deccan (c. 1365–1532)
<i>vilayat</i>	domain, kingdom of a <i>pīr</i> (q.v.) or earthly sovereign

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### Interviews

Much of the information in this volume is based on interviews carried out at Muslim, Hindu and Christian shrines and learned foundations in Kerala and Tamilnadu in the course of four extended research visits to India between 1976 and 1983. These included interviews with priests, officiants, worshippers, scholars and other key individuals at the following institutions and localities:

Amir Mahal (residence of HH the Prince of Arcot) Madras

The Lateefia madrasa and Hazarat Makan foundation, Vellore

The Muhammadan Public Library, Madras

Diwan Sahib Bagh, Mylapore, Madras

Worshippers, scholars, pirzadas, dargah officials and members of leading Muslim families in Kayalpatanam, Kulasekarapatanam, Madras, Madurai, Melapalaiyam, Nagore, Negapatanam, Pudukkottai, Trichy and Vellore, and at the Shahul Hamid dargahs in Penang and Singapore

Church leaders and members of leading Parava families in Tuticorin, Manapad, Kanniyakumari, Uvari and Madras

Hindu temple authorities, Christian church leaders, worshippers and members of prominent Tamil Hindu and Christian families in Kamanayakanpatti, Kayatar, Kudenkulam, Madurai, Nagercoil, Palaiyamkottai, Pudukkottai, Tanjore, Tiruccentur, Tirunelveli, Tirusikkal, Trichy, Vadakkankulam and Velankanni

Hindu temple authorities, church leaders, worshippers and members of prominent Malayali Hindu and Christian families in Cochin, Kottayam, Quilon and Trivandrum

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